



PHD

Searching for a better life: young people living in slum communities in Bangkok

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**SEARCHING FOR A BETTER LIFE:
YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN SLUM
COMMUNITIES IN BANGKOK**

Sorcha Mary Mahony

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Bath

Department of Social and Policy Sciences

April 2010

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Jump up high and reach for the sky my sweet, sweet girl. ☺

[L]est we forget: the reading, the reflecting, and the writing are as nothing in comparison with the cost to those who have lived the stories told here...I trust I have done them no further violence in the rough and impressionistic strokes I have left on this canvas.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes 1992, p.xiii

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

Karr, J.B.A. January 1849.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the everyday lives and dreams of young people living in urban poverty in Thailand, focusing on their practices and aspirations within three key spheres of action. In recent years, a number of emerging bodies of literature have taken youth in the developing world as the objects of their analysis; the literature on *youth in Thailand*, studies of *youth and development* within the Thai and international spheres, and the *new anthropology of youth* each focus on the lives of young people – social, cultural and economic – and see youth as active agents in the creation of society, culture and the economy. This thesis, drawing on the analysis of ethnographic data, contends that each of these bodies of literature constructs young people in partial or misleading ways, and in particular that insufficient emphasis is placed on the *unintended consequences* that can ensue from everyday practice and the pursuit of dreams. It argues that if these emerging literatures on youth in the developing world are to adequately conceptualise and represent young people, then they must attend to these unintended consequences. As the thesis will demonstrate, doing so facilitates analysis of the ways in which different spheres of action affect each other, of the structures that constrain and enable young people, and of the way in which attempting to participate in dominant cultures can have profoundly counter-productive outcomes.

The thesis also explores some of the methodological processes involved in immersion in, and withdrawal from, ‘the field’. It argues that one of the tasks of social research is to bring out the multiple and shifting nature of interpretation, and to be explicit about the contexts in which such interpretations are produced.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE SCENE¹

4.30 p.m. Khlong Toey slum, Bangkok. July 2006.

I am on my way to the community gym that takes place in the forecourt of a large NGO located in the city's biggest slum. I step into the fierce gaze of the sun and walk under a massive concrete expressway that roars and shakes under the weight of the container trucks transporting goods to and from the port. Lorries are strewn everywhere, rusty skeletons of their former selves that now provide beds to those who don't have them and climbing frames to the young children who live nearby. I cross a railway line littered with rubbish and walk under a second expressway, past an old man sitting on a broken sofa, his ribs sticking out, his back as bent as the top of a coat hanger. Behind the sofa is a living room which has no walls or ceiling. The space is demarcated by rickety wooden cabinets which run along three sides. A television blares out and about ten people gather around to watch. I walk on, past a young man who is laughing hysterically, one arm inside his zipped-up jacket holding a plastic bag and sniffing from it. I walk on. A man approaches and asks for five baht, and follows me up the road, barefoot, clutching at my wrist. I get to the main intersection at the centre of the slum and see P Jok² making fruit shakes for her customers. She nods towards a group of young couples sitting on motorbikes opposite her stall. 'Look', her nod says, 'I told you the teenagers around here are no good'. The mid-afternoon lull – those hours after lunch when the sun beats hard, the streets are quiet and daily life seems to move in slow motion – gives way to the hustle and bustle of early evening. Bar-b-q coals are lit and stoked and smoke billows out across the tin rooftops. Woks hiss, dirty water splashes into the gutters, announcements from the community leader crackle through loud-speakers that are

¹ This opening vignette is compiled from observation notes and from interviews and everyday

² P is the designation given to older siblings, but can also be used for friends and acquaintances.

tied to the lamp-posts, and motorbikes, bicycles, push carts, pedestrians and stray dogs compete for space on the dusty lanes. I arrive at the gym and it is deserted except for Som, a young man of seventeen who sits on a weight-lifting bench under a plastic awning waiting for his friends.

Som is wearing an NYC baseball cap, a pair of bright orange sunglasses and three chunky metal chains around his neck. Hanging from each chain is a pendant: from one a miniature statue of Buddha, from another a letter from the Japanese alphabet with the word *JAPAN* inscribed underneath, and from the third a diamante dollar sign. He is dressed in a Puma vest, into which he has cut a deep V shape at the neck, and a pair of baggy jeans scarcely held up by a belt emblazoned with the word *BLING*, clearly worn for ornamental rather than functional purposes. Som sits with his elbows resting on his knees, his hands clasped together, his head hung low. I sit beside him and he tells me that he is not feeling so good. When I ask why, he says he hasn't slept for three nights because he has so many problems. What problems? I ask. And he tells me of the troubles that the dark nights intensify in their own cruel way.

Som's mother recently told him that she and Som's sister would be moving up country, because a family feud following the death of Som's grandmother means that they are no longer welcome in the small wooden shack where they live with Som and Som's aunt, uncle and cousins. Som has also been told to leave and has three weeks to find somewhere to live. He does not earn a reliable or adequate income: some weeks he gets casual labouring work at the port for one or two nights, he helps a friend's mother at her market stall for a couple of hours on weekday afternoons, and sometimes he gets extra work on Saturday evenings packing away the tables and chairs at a local street cafe. Whilst these sources of income are indispensable for Som, they provide him with no security – nothing with which to weather the storm that has come his way.

Som was born just outside Bangkok and lived in a rented apartment in a low-income neighbourhood with his mother, father and older sister until he was eight years old.

His father came from the north east of Thailand and worked as a telephone repair man, and his mother comes from a family who settled in Khlong Toey slum in the 1950s, and worked in a garment factory. When Som was eight his father died from cancer of the liver, and an ensuing conflict between his mother and his father's family left Som's mother with no inheritance and insufficient means with which to raise her two children. She moved back to Khlong Toey slum with Som and his sister, and into her mother's house which was already home to Som's grandmother, aunt, uncle and four cousins. During this time Som attended the local community school but left at thirteen, before completing compulsory schooling, because he was no longer prepared to suffer the beatings he received at the hands of his teachers (punishments for falling asleep in class, a result of working in the early mornings to help his mother make ends meet). For the next three years Som worked in a variety of informal jobs; at a toy shop, at market stalls and food stalls, and running errands for neighbours. He continued to live in his grandmother's house with his mother and sister and extended family, but relationships within the household grew increasingly strained, as poverty, overcrowding and gruelling work took their toll on family members, and as Som's mother and sister became increasingly dependent on alcohol and prone to bouts of violence. When Som was fourteen he moved out to live with a girlfriend who was considerably older than him and rented her own room, but when that relationship broke down he moved back to the family home. When Som was sixteen he decided to return to school in order to increase his earning potential and enrolled on a weekend course at the local community college in order to prepare for his lower secondary exams. Since then he has been studying part time and working as a casual labourer, and dreams of working in an office from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m., of wearing a suit, and of earning enough money to leave the slum and support his mother.

I ask Som where he will stay when he leaves home and he says with a friend until he can afford to rent a room of his own. We sit in silence for a moment and he pushes a rusty weight around on the ground with his foot then nods over to the gates of the NGO as he hears his friends calling out to announce their arrival.

This thesis is about Som and other young people living in slum communities in Bangkok, at a moment in their lives and a moment in national and global history marked by a series of major, interlocking transitions. In particular it is about *the search for a better life*; what this means to participants, how they try to achieve it, and the outcomes and side effects of their endeavours as these are played out in a context where the question of shifting values looms large in public and private discourses. It explores a world in which the search for something better is full of hope yet fraught with tension and beset with unintended consequences. The thesis reflects on issues surrounding agency as these pertain to young people and those important to them living in urban poverty in an environment characterised by continuity as well as change. A study such as this represents an important and timely exercise, not least because (as will be discussed in the following chapter), in recent years young people have become objects of central concern within Thai scholarly, media and government debate, within major international development organisations, and within the newly emerging anthropology of youth.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief overview of the processes by which I became interested in conducting research in the slums of Bangkok. The second section introduces the city, with emphasis on two processes resulting from its rapid socio-economic transformation that carry particular background relevance for this study. The third section explains selected key terms used in the thesis (key terms that do not appear in this section are discussed where relevant in other chapters) and the final section provides a chapter-by-chapter summary of the thesis.

RESEARCH JOURNEY

My identification of this research topic has been a long and winding journey. I first went to Bangkok in the spring of 2005. At that time I was not intending to undertake fieldwork there, in fact I was only passing through for a week on my way to the north east of Thailand to conduct a study of young people living in a village community.

One of my first memories during this initial trip is of driving from Bangkok airport and passing Khlong Toey slum from the comfort of an air-conditioned taxi. I saw a dirty, stagnant river into which houses perched on broken stilts fell. There was a bridge leading to them from the main road which was made of wood and had planks missing. In between some of the houses there were walkways, also made from wooden planks, and there were children hanging up washing in open-air living rooms. When the taxi turned into Sukhumvit Road the first thing I saw was Starbucks. Followed by McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Dunkin' Donuts, Haagan Dazs and Boots the Chemist. I lost count of the 7-11 convenience stores, whose orange and green stripes, bleeping doors and uniformed counter clerks later became emblematic of the city. Then I noticed the street stalls lining the pavements alongside the multi-national shop fronts, selling wooden souvenirs, counterfeit brand name shoes, t-shirts and mobile phone accessories. There were young men pushing trolleys laden with food, somehow managing to dodge the swerving buses that overflowed with passengers, and old women carrying baskets suspended from long poles that balanced across their shoulders, almost bent double under the weight. Middle aged women sold pineapples, watermelons and mangoes from glass cabinets on wheels, and children stood in the middle of the road selling jasmine garlands through car windows. The taxi drove through Siam Square and I saw young people sitting around in groups, chatting on their mobile phones, laughing and flirting, wearing Stussy baseball caps and carrying Luis Vuitton handbags.

For the next few months I lived in the north east of Thailand, in a rice-farming village with a woman whose husband lived and worked as a taxi driver in Bangkok. I made friends with the mother in the house opposite, who had named her daughter *Money* in the hope that she would one day work in the city and send her earnings home. An old man told me of his concerns about his granddaughter who worked in a factory in Bangkok and had started using all kinds of expensive, 'nonsense' beauty products. I listened to my neighbour's stories of childhood and to her accounts of today's young men and women in the village who were heading for the capital on the labour migration trail and bringing back all sorts of new and unwanted customs. I learned something of the position that Bangkok holds in the popular imagination as a

symbol of socio-economic advancement and moral degeneration, and I learned that I was not well-suited to doing fieldwork in the countryside.

I returned to the UK and thought about Bangkok, about the children in the slum and the street vendors, and about the teenagers in Siam Square with their designer handbags, about all I had seen there in my short stay and all I had heard during my time upcountry. I began to wonder what life might be like for young people at different ends of the socio-economic spectrum living in a context marked by profound change as well as continuity, what it might be like to grow up in a country that prides itself on its observance of tradition as well as its embracing of modernity, and how life might be different for boys and girls of different ages living in the families that benefited most and least from Thailand's 'miraculous' development. Whilst young slum dwellers eventually became the main focus of this thesis, at this initial stage my observations and (as yet unformed) questions covered this broad spectrum. I decided to return to Bangkok, and in November 2005 I set off for a year of fieldwork.

BANGKOK³

Bangkok is referred to as the 'center of the Thai economy' (Slagter and Kerbo 2000, p.34); as having procured 'the lion's share' of the changes that have taken place in Thailand since the 1960s (Ruland and Ladavalaya 1996, p.30). Despite recent moves to stimulate regional development (as demonstrated for example in the Thai government's OTOP programme⁴), Bangkok remains at the heart of Thailand's economic activity and the social, cultural, environmental and other changes that have accompanied this. What began hundreds of years ago as a small water hamlet became a busy trading port and centre of political and royal power a few centuries later, and by the late twentieth century Bangkok had become a sprawling south east

³ Whilst Thailand, and Bangkok in particular has been 'modernising' since the mid 19th century under the rule of the Chakri kings, the changes that have taken place since the 1960s are said to have been particularly rapid and profound (for example, Slagter and Kerbo 2000). The following discussion focuses on this more recent history.

⁴ 'One Tambon One Product'. A *tambon* is an administrative area. The OTOP scheme was initiated in 2001 by Thailand's then prime minister, designed to promote regional development.

Asian mega-city (Askew 2002, pp.15-20) that had earned itself the title of ‘the most primate city on earth’ (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005, p.199).

For centuries Thailand’s economy was primarily agricultural; based on wet-rice farming in rural areas, but by the 1980s agriculture as a percentage of GDP and exports had shrunk, and the manufacturing industries – based in Bangkok – had expanded significantly (Slagter and Kerbo 2000, p.45), as had the marketing and advertising industries that promoted their products to external and internal markets (Jory 1999, p.463). These shifts were accompanied by an increasing economic openness, as foreign investment, trade liberalisation and export-orientation became standard features on the economic landscape (Slagter and Kerbo 2000, p.46).

These changes meant that the Thai economy grew at a phenomenal rate, a rate that has been noted as ‘one of the fastest... in the developing world’ (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005, p.166). Prior to the 1960s Thailand was one of the poorest countries in the world (Slagter and Kerbo 2000, p.43) but only a few decades later had been reclassified as a middle income economy and joined the ranks of the Asian tigers (Parnwell and Arghiros 1996, p.1). Following Thailand’s economic boom (and the downturn of the mid 1980s) was a crisis of ‘severe’ proportions: in the mid 1990s increasing economic instability resulting from unsupervised financial liberalisation lead to overinvestment, which in turn prompted increasing speculation on the Thai baht and huge foreign reserve spending on the part of the Bank of Thailand (Kittiprapas 2001, p.369). In 1997 the Thai government, with external debts of more than \$70 billion (Hewison 1999, p.29) unpegged the baht from the currencies to which it had been tied and its value plummeted, which triggered a national, then regional crisis (Kittiprapas 2001, p.369). The Thai economy ground to a halt. Major infrastructure projects stopped, factories closed and investment decreased (ibid., p.370). Bankruptcy rates doubled, unemployment reached the highest levels on record and education drop-out rates soared (Hewison 2000, p.283). Despite debate concerning the long term effects of the crisis, with some commentators referring to it in retrospect as ‘growing pains’ (Slagter and Kerbo 2000, p.46) and others claiming that it ‘will take a long time to recover from’ (Boonyabancha 2002, p.3), there is no

doubt that Bangkok, and the Thai economy more broadly, have changed enormously since the middle of the twentieth century.

The transformations outlined here have lead to two processes of particular relevance for this thesis: first, an increase in socio-economic inequality (for example, see Parnwell and Aghiros 1996, p.1) and a concomitant growth of slum settlements in Bangkok to house those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy in the city (Viratkapan and Perera 2006, p.159), and second a growing concern over the question of 'Thai values'.

Inequality and the expansion of slum settlements in Bangkok

Throughout boom and bust, families like Som's and others living in urban poverty in Bangkok (as well as those living in other cities, and poor people in rural communities) struggled to gain a foothold from which to benefit from their country's economic success and weather the storm of its crises. As Parnwell and Aghiros (1996) note:

... The benefits of the boom have not affected everyone and everywhere to an equal extent. Many have been left behind, and even marginalised, in the scramble for self-improvement. The 'other' Thailand is found away from the economic heartland of Greater Bangkok and ... also... among the slums and squatter settlements, the scavengers and street-vendors of the capital city.

(Parnwell and Aghiros 1996, p.1)

During the boom, business magnates became 'fabulously wealthy' (Hewison 1999, p.22), capitalising on investment opportunities and bolstering the ranks of Thailand's elite. The middle classes also prospered, populating a growing number of luxury town houses and suburban housing estates, living lifestyles characterised by western-style consumption which were increasingly promoted throughout the country via the ever-more ubiquitous medium of television (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005, p.223).

Meanwhile, Som's family, alongside countless others, continued to struggle for subsistence and prosperity, now doing so in a context where material wealth was widely revered and represented as achievable through individual effort (ibid.).

During the crisis, it was the poor who felt the impact most keenly. The cost of living rose whilst their incomes fell, debts increased, savings were in short supply and social security nets were grossly inadequate (Hewison 2000, p.283), making the business of everyday survival an extremely difficult one. For Som this meant having to steal food and having to work before and after school to earn money to give to his mother who had lost her job as a factory worker. The construction industry was amongst the worst hit by the crisis, which severely affected the urban poor since they supplied a significant proportion of the sector's unskilled labour (Kittiprapas 2001, p.370).

For the urban poor, who were among those to gain least during the boom and suffer most through the bust, slums provided cheap housing and continue to constitute 'the most important housing delivery system' for some of Bangkok's poorest residents (Viratkapan and Perera 2006, p.159). Som lives in one of over 1200 slum communities in the city, which together house over a million people, and there are a growing number of slums located in the suburbs and in Bangkok's neighbouring provinces (ibid.).

The first slums in Thailand emerged in Bangkok in the 1950s⁵. In 1954 the Thai government announced the Land Ownership Act, which required people to register the land they were living on and declare ownership of it. Many were unaware of this process and what it required of them, or did not understand its implications, and did

⁵ The information in this, and the following six paragraphs draws on four sources; from Boonyabancha's (2002) and (2005) articles on community development and slum upgrading in Thailand respectively, on Viratkapan and Perera's (2006) article on slum relocation projects in Bangkok, and from a chapter entitled '*The beginning of slums in Bangkok*' in a Thai-language book which my interpreter translated into English. This book was in the Duang Prateep Foundation (DPF) library at the time of fieldwork, however I am unable to confirm its reference details as my interpreter has since been unable to locate it. Where referred to later, I use the reference Anon-DPF (2006), which was the year I accessed the publication.

not take part in registration procedures. Land that was not registered immediately became the property of the government, inhabitants became 'illegal trespassers' and were evicted, and the land was sold to private investors at very low prices who built factories on it. Those who worked, or came looking for work, in the factories erected make-shift accommodation nearby, and gradually, as existing factories expanded and new ones sprang up, these informal clusters of improvised housing grew and were labelled 'slums'. Informal settlements around Bangkok port expanded particularly rapidly, as sea-based trading activity increased. Som's family migrated to Bangkok from the north east of Thailand and settled in Khlong Toey slum to form part of the original workforce at Bangkok port.

In the late 1950s, under US planning guidance, the city of Bangkok was restructured, and this entailed turning canals into roads and selling even more land to private investors. These processes meant that some slum communities were demolished and their residents evicted, since they were located next to canals (which provided a source of water for inhabitants) or on other prime land. Evicted families settled on vacant land and moved to alternative slum communities, which continued to grow.

In the 1960s, luxury estates sprang up throughout the city to house those who were benefitting most from the country's rapid economic growth, and the creation of these enclaves entailed even more slum demolition and evictions. Also, with the erection of these estates the price of nearby land, housing and rent rocketed, and pushed those without sufficient money onto still vacant land in other parts of the city. By 1968 around fifty slums had been identified in Bangkok. During this decade, the city authorities created the Slum Improvement Office, which saw slums as eyesores and obstacles to modernisation, and responded to them by demolishing the dwellings, evicting the residents and selling the land to private investors. Once again, many evicted families resettled in other remaining slums, and began new settlements on unoccupied land.

In the 1970s there was a proliferation of housing estates for the growing middle classes in Bangkok, which again meant that the slum dwellers living on this newly

desirable land were evicted to make way for slum clearances, and were priced out of local housing and rental markets. During this decade the Thai government set up several slum committees to find a more agreeable solution to Bangkok's 'slum problem' than clearances and eviction. This entailed initiation of the resettlement scheme, which saw slum dwellers relocated to housing projects on the outskirts of the city, where work opportunities and social networks were few. In 1973 the Thai government, with World Bank funding, set up the National Housing Authority (NHA) to build new low-cost housing for poor people. However over time, the NHA's much-needed subsidies from central government were reduced until financial support stopped altogether, meaning that severe limits were placed on the capacity of the NHA to deliver on its mandate. In 1977 the Thai government developed a new policy towards slum communities. Known as the national slum upgrading programme, this was intended as an alternative to previous demolition/ eviction and relocation approaches, focusing instead on improving slums, for example by providing physical infrastructure such as concrete pathways, drainage systems and water supplies.

In the 1980s, as Thailand reached the height of its economic boom, property development in the inner city and even further increases in land prices meant more slum clearances and evictions, despite the stated intentions of the national upgrading programme. During this period, housing conditions for the urban poor in Bangkok actually deteriorated. The 1980s also saw further restructuring of the city, this time under German planning guidance, which focussed on the creation of express ways to ease severe traffic congestion problems. This meant yet more evictions for slum dwellers, since the land that some were living on was cleared to make way for these transport links. Remaining slums expanded to accommodate evictees, and yet more new settlements sprang up to house others. By 1985 almost 1000 slum settlements had been identified in Bangkok. Also during the 1980s, civil society activism grew throughout Thailand, including in the area of urban poverty and housing, and there was increasing resistance on the part of NGOs, slum residents and left-wing scholars to the investors and developers wanting to make more profitable use of Bangkok's increasingly valuable land. However, civil society activities were fragmented and struggled to cope with the scope of slum dwellers' needs for assistance.

Throughout the 1990s the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) worked with the NHA to deliver low-cost housing in the city. Both operated with a mandate to assist the housing needs of low-income communities, and in 1992 the Thai government also set up the Urban Community Development Office in order to find a sustainable solution to urban poverty and the ‘slum problem’. In 2003 the Thai government, through the NHA and other partner organisations⁶ launched a nation-wide, two-pronged approach designed to respond to the housing needs of the urban poor. The first of these was the *Baan Ua Arhtorn* programme, which seeks to design and build low-cost flats at subsidised rates, and the other was the *Baan Mankrong* programme, which focuses on upgrading existing slum settlements. Despite these seemingly positive policies, there are currently over two hundred slum settlements earmarked for relocation (Viritkapan and Perera 2006, p.160). During fieldwork two slum communities in Khlong Toey were in the process of being demolished to make way for a new entertainment complex and residents had been offered accommodation in sites on the outskirts of the city. Further, the physical infrastructure in most communities remained woefully inadequate. For Som and his fellow slum dwellers this means intermittent water and electricity supplies, and inadequate sewerage and rubbish collection systems.

In summary, over the last few decades of the twentieth century, as the Thai economy grew rapidly, so did socio-economic inequality and the number of poor people in need of cheap housing in Bangkok. Slums provided, and continue to provide, much-needed accommodation for those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. Official responses to them have shifted from eviction to relocation and finally to new, low-cost housing provision and upgrading, although the success of these remains questionable. Thus, Som, his peers and their families have been afforded a place in the city but theirs is a highly ambiguous one, marked by poverty, tenure insecurity, substandard housing and inadequate infrastructure, as well as by widespread experiences of prejudice.

⁶ Specifically, the Community Organisations Development Institute, or CODI

The 'Thai values' debate

As well as entailing increased inequality and a proliferation of slum settlements in Bangkok, the transformations that swept through Thailand in the second half of the twentieth century have stimulated intense debate over the question of 'Thai values'. This debate is discussed throughout the empirical chapters of this thesis, but I shall make several points here by way of introducing it. The debate features strongly in the Thai and English language media, in government and academic circles, and in everyday conversations amongst the (older generation) general public in Thailand, and contends largely with the notion of *changing* values. In this debate it is generally accepted that the socio-economic transformations identified earlier have led to changes in the norms, expectations and lifestyles of Thai people (in particular the young generation), and on the whole there is concern for what is perceived as an encroachment of 'western' ways onto the territory of Thai values, although there are subtleties and nuances to the arguments made concerning these changes (for example concerning where the responsibility lies for them, that they contain positive as well as negative aspects and that criticism of them is hypocritical). The following extract from an article written by Senator Thongpao in *The Bangkok Post* illustrates something of this disquiet:

I am worried about conditions in our country today. In my view, there are too many evils in our society that can intoxicate people, especially the youth, and lead them astray along the pathways of evil, extravagance, and promiscuity, which is all a far cry from the good old Thai values. Western ways have taken our country hostage and our vulnerable children fall prey to them.

(Senator Thongpao, in *The Bangkok Post* 3/11/2002)

With specific relevance for this study, within the Thai values debate the issue of consumerism, or 'extravagance' – understood in particular to contravene Buddhist norms concerning the renunciation of worldly goods and the self – is held up for special scrutiny, as is young people's perceived abandonment of their families in favour of friends and leisure pursuits. For Som, this means being derided by elders in his community and within government, academic and media circles for trying to augment his status in one of the few ways available to him. As we will see in the

empirical chapters of this thesis, there are also numerous features of ‘traditional’ Thai culture and religion – notably the notions of *filial obligation* and *personal responsibility* for one’s lot – that remain powerful orienting principles in contemporary discourse and practice.

The processes discussed in this section – Thailand’s economic transformation and the increased inequality and questioning of values that this has entailed – form the salient aspects of the backdrop against which this study can be understood. The following section outlines some of the key terms used in this study.

KEY TERMS

‘Young people’ and ‘youth’

The majority of young people who form the core of this thesis were between fifteen and twenty two years of age at the time of fieldwork. Research was also conducted with slightly younger people (thirteen year olds), and reference is made to them (as ‘boys’ or ‘girls’) at points in the discussion, however the focus is on those between the ages specified above. I refer to these participants as ‘young people’ and ‘youth’. It is widely recognised that defining ‘youth’ (and ‘children’ or ‘adults’ for that matter) solely in terms of chronological age provides an insufficient understanding of the ways in which lives are socially constructed: what it means to be a person of a particular age varies across space and over time, and what it means to be a person of a certain age living in a particular place and time varies according to, for example, the prevailing norms surrounding inter-generational and gender relations, and socio-economic positioning.

It is also recognised that the selection of labels with which to write about particular people, not least young people, can be a far from neutral process (see Hall and Montgomery 2000; Bucholtz 2002) – and perhaps especially so within the development industry. The terms we choose to write with carry meaning – the writer’s and the reader’s – which in turn reflect the broader connotations that prevail

at a particular time in a particular culture. Labels can be used to strategic effect; to engender certain associations and emotions and invoke a reader's sympathy – or otherwise – for the people about whom one writes. For example, labelling people in their teenage years or even in their early twenties 'street children' (a category applied to young people living on the streets in the developing world) functions to construct them as innocent victims in need of support (see Hecht 1998), whilst the term 'homeless youth' (a category more readily applied to young people living on the streets in developed countries) carries connotations of delinquency and does not invoke the same sympathetic concern (Hall and Montgomery 2000). Further, it has been argued that the term 'child' suggests a need for intervention, whilst the label 'youth' suggests an element of self-will and an absence of need for assistance (Ansell 2005).

In this thesis I use the term 'young people' (or young woman, man or slum-dweller) as this seems to be the most neutral one available, and because it encompasses participants at the younger end of the age range as well as those in their early twenties. I use this interchangeably with the term 'youth', and employ the latter because this is widely used in the literatures with which this thesis connects. There are other terms employed in these literatures to refer to people of the same age as those discussed here, such as 'adolescents' and 'teenagers', however I refrain from using these because each of them carries associations that are not appropriate for this research. 'Adolescent' is associated with an emphasis on biological and psychological development and with related claims to universalism, whilst this study explores socio-economic, cultural and moral aspects of young people's lives and recognises these as products of history. The term 'teenager' technically refers to those between the ages of thirteen and nineteen and not those in their early twenties, who form an important element in this study. Whilst I do discuss the phenomenon of the 'teenage life', and whilst participants use the Thai term *wairoon* (which is translated as 'teenager') to refer to people in their teens and early twenties, using this term may be misleading to English language readers.

‘Adult Carers’

At the outset of this research I worked with the term ‘parents’ when referring to those with responsibility for young people. However, this (rather naive) use of terminology took insufficient account of the multiple systems of care and forms of cohabitation that young slum dwellers experience. I moved on to use specific terms which denoted the particular relationship between young people and those caring for them, such as grandmother, aunt or neighbour, but this transpired to be too cumbersome in the writing of the thesis. I settled on the term ‘adult carer’ because it points in the first instance to generational differences between the two main groups of participants, and in the second instance to one of the defining features of the ideal-type relationship between adults and the young people in their charge.

Although I use the term ‘adult carer’ and do so because, after considerable deliberation, it transpired to be the most appropriate, I use the term with some caution. At times during fieldwork I questioned whether, and to what extent, some of those with responsibility for young people actually ‘cared’ for them at all, in a practical sense. Further, there were cases where those caring for young participants, such as older siblings or cousins, were themselves not much older than the young people in their charge. Moreover, attaching the term ‘carer’ only to older generation participants and not to young people – many of whom had a significant duty of care for elders – is perhaps misleading given the bidirectionality of support between adults and young people. However, I have retained the term ‘adult carer’ because it appears to be the most suitable given what is available.

‘Slums’, ‘slum dwellers’ and the ‘urban poor’

The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) defines ‘slum’ and ‘squatter’ settlements in the following ways:

Slum settlements usually consist of run-down housing in older, established, legally built parts of the city proper. Slum buildings are mostly old and poorly maintained. Most of the residents rent their accommodation, although owners occupy some space or detached structures. In some cases, many of the buildings have more than one floor and house several families.

(UNCHS 1982, cited by Viratkapan and Perera 2006, p.158)

Squatter settlements are mainly uncontrolled low-income residential areas with ambiguous legal status regarding land occupation. They are to a large extent built by the inhabitants themselves using their own means and are usually poorly equipped with public utilities and community services. The usual image of a squatter settlement is of a poor, under serviced, overcrowded and dilapidated settlement consisting of make-shift, improvised housing areas. The land occupied by squatter settlements is often, but not always, located further from the city centre than in the case with slums. Often, but not always, the houses are built and occupied by their owners. The land is often occupied illegally.

(ibid.)

Viratkapan and Perera (2006) note that in the context of Thailand the label ‘slum’ is used to refer to what UNCHS separately label ‘slum’ and ‘squatter’ settlements. Pornchokchai (2003) notes that Thailand’s NHA and BMA define slums in the following way respectively:

A dirty, damp, swampy or unhealthy area with overcrowded buildings and dwellers [sic] which can be harmful for health or lives or can be a source of unlawful or immoral actions

(NHA, cited in Pornchokchai 2003, p.13)

An overcrowded, unorderedly [sic] and dilapidated community with unample [sic] environment which can be harmful for health and lives. The minimum number of housing units per rai is 15

(ibid.)

In 1982 Thai government ministers in the Department for Public Welfare suggested that the label '*chumchorn ae at*' ('crowded community') should replace 'slum' in an attempt to diminish the negative connotations and prejudice experienced by residents. However, the term continued to be widely used and the government continued to define the 'crowded communities' in the same way as they had previously defined 'slums'; as communities that are:

... full of people with bad quality houses. People there lack money and assets, public utilities and food, have poor sanitation, low education, and have family problems and distorted behaviour

(Anon-DPF 2006)

Slums do not necessarily house the poorest of the poor in urban areas; indeed it has been argued that the poorest of the poor are not housed at all, they are homeless, or are itinerant workers on construction sites (Pornchokchai 2003). In Thailand the NHA divides the urban poor into three levels; the 'lowest', which comprises homeless people and those who beg for a living, the 'middle', which comprises slum dwellers who earn low incomes and the 'highest', which comprises those who rent

low-cost housing that is not in slum communities and who earn more than those at the middle level (Anon-DPF 2006). Clearly, such rigid categorisation breaks down once it is recognised that some homeless people live on the streets in slum communities, that some slum dwellers earn relatively large incomes (for example through money lending, drug trafficking or prostitution), and that some who rent low-cost housing outside of designated slum areas earn less than some living in slums.

However, whilst slum communities are marked by considerable internal diversity (Askew 2002, p143) and whilst there may be blurred boundaries between slums and non-slum communities, there are common characteristics within them. Incomes in slum communities tend to be very low, as does educational and occupational status. They are densely populated⁷, tenure insecurity is a significant issue and housing and other physical infrastructure is of low quality. Social problems such as substance abuse, violence and family breakdown are common. House fires are a constant threat, as many dwellings are packed closely together and made of wood, and the cooking oil used is highly flammable. Pornchokchai identifies four overriding characteristics uniting the settlements labelled 'slums': over-crowding, limited privacy, sub-standard housing and a sub-standard environment (Pornchokchai 2003, p.13).

In this research I use the terms 'slum' and 'slum communities' and refer to participants as 'slum dwellers' for several reasons. First, 'slum' is the label that many of the participants used when referring to themselves, each other and their neighbourhoods – sometimes with mocking self-deprecation, sometimes with a painful awareness of how it signified their low social status and sometimes with no obvious connotations at all. Whilst their use of this label could arguably be a result of my identity as an outsider and someone they expected to perceive them in certain ways, it became a familiar term and did not seem to cause offense to the people who shared their stories and their lives with me. Second, it is the label used by the NGOs and their staff with whom I built relationships during fieldwork. Third, the term

⁷ In this context, meaning at least 15 households per *rai* (a *rai* is a unit of land which is just over two hectares).

‘slum’ and its various permutations remain commonplace in the literature by Thai and foreign academics writing about low income urban communities in Thailand, albeit sometimes with acknowledgement that there may be more appropriate labels.

Throughout the thesis I also use the phrase ‘urban poor’ to refer to participants living in slum communities. In doing so I have not measured them against any official poverty line, but take a relative approach, defining them as ‘poor’ on the basis that their incomes are significantly lower than the average in Bangkok (see Chestnut et. al. 1997) and, from the data collected in this research, they have significantly less savings and assets (and higher levels of unmanageable debt) than their wealthy counterparts. I also use the term ‘marginalised’ because this is widely employed within other studies of urban poverty (for example see Bourgois 2003) and speaks of the structural processes at work in its production and reproduction.

‘Wealthy’ participants

As was mentioned earlier, and as will be discussed more fully in the methodology chapter, this research was previously a study of young people in slum communities and young people from wealthier families, and whilst slum dwellers have become the focus of the thesis, I refer to wealthier youth and their parents throughout. At the initial stages I used the term ‘middle class’ to refer to these participants, however it became apparent that the differences in material wealth between the two groups was vast, and that my sample had bypassed a middle strata. I use the term ‘wealthy’ in order to convey the affluence of non-slum participants.

SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

This thesis is about young people living in slum communities in Bangkok and their search for a better life. In exploring this it connects with three bodies of literature, and these are addressed in chapter two. The first of these is the academic study of *youth in Thailand*, and discussion of this highlights several dominant tendencies therein. First, it points to the propensity to focus on practices of risk, destruction, sex

and drugs and the resulting image of Thai youth as bent on self and societal destruction. Second, discussion points to the inclination towards exploring issues of interest to researchers, especially through quantitative methodologies, and third it highlights the lack of analytical attention to young people's socio-economic positioning and to the interactions between those in positions of disadvantage and the structures that constrain and enable them. This thesis suggests that an ethnographic study of marginalised youth in Bangkok offers a more emic understanding of their lives, struggles and dreams, and can bring to light important issues and experiences that arise in the interaction between marginalised agency and structures.

The second section of chapter two locates this study with reference to the emerging discourses on *youth and development* within the Thai and international contexts. In particular, discussion points to two prominent tendencies; first to the way in which these discourses focus on the sphere of economic production to the exclusion of other important spheres, and second to the construction of young people as responsible for their own development and capable of bringing this about through the exercise of agency. This thesis suggests that if youth and development policy is to benefit marginalised young people then it needs to be more attuned to the range of spheres within which practices can be understood, not least because it is in the interconnections between different spheres of activity that adverse experiences can be found. This thesis also suggests that if youth and development policy is to benefit marginalised young people then it needs to better recognise that agency has unintended consequences, which in turn can be understood as a product of structural constraint.

The third and final section of chapter two discusses an emerging literature known as the *new anthropology of youth*. Discussion points to the emphasis in this literature on evidencing and celebrating young people's exercise of cultural agency and the relative lack of attention to its outcomes. Discussion here also points to the way in which the handful of studies that do explore outcomes of agency tend to focus on practices of resistance and their contradictory consequences. This thesis suggests that if this emerging literature is to provide a comprehensive account of young people's

cultural agency then it must attend better to its outcomes (in particular unintended ones), and attend better to the way in which counter-productive outcomes can ensue from *participating in* dominant cultures as well as resisting them.

Chapter three of this thesis reports on the methodology used in this study. It offers a personal and reflexive account of the processes of research design, data collection, analytical interpretation and writing, paying particular attention in the final section to the issue of multiple and shifting interpretations and the ethical dilemmas these give rise to on the part of the researcher.

Chapters four, five and six present the empirical findings of this research. Each chapter takes a key sphere of practice in the lives and dreams of young slum dwellers – *living the teenage life*, *contributing to the family* and *building better material futures* respectively – and explores the activities involved in each, the meanings that participants attach to them, the pertinent elements of the contexts in which those activities take place and the unintended consequences that ensue from them.

Chapter four focuses on young slum dwellers' endeavours to 'live the teenage life'; to engage with the products and images of the global youth culture industry and through these to construct images of wealth, global connection and modernity and present these to others, especially their peers. The chapter explores the complex and contradictory context in which these practices take place and some of their unintended consequences, in particular those relating to the other two spheres explored in the thesis.

Chapter five discusses young slum dwellers' attempts to contribute to their families, in particular to provide much-needed support in the form of money and labour, and through this to construct themselves as good children. The chapter pays particular attention to the unintended consequences of these endeavours, again paying particular attention to those that spill over into the other two spheres. Further, this

chapter investigates young slum dwellers' attempts to make the practices discussed here compatible with living the teenage life, once again focusing on the unintended outcomes of their actions.

Chapter six discusses young slum dwellers' attempts to secure a better standard of living in the future. It explores the key ways in which they work towards their dreams of material advancement (notably through turning to others for assistance with studying and work), paying particular attention to the unintended consequences ensuing from the fragility of the support available to them. It explores participants' own understandings of the struggle to get ahead and notes the irony that it is precisely by virtue of thinking and acting in accordance with widely-revered norms in the local, national and global contexts that their endeavours are so precarious.

The concluding chapter of this thesis begins by recapping on the main arguments made in the empirical chapters and goes on to reiterate the importance of recognising the unintended consequences of practice, highlighting three main empirical conclusions that can be drawn from this, as well as a methodological one, and offering a conceptual diagram for understanding the first of these. It then recommends some possible areas of programming, and closes with updates on the participants with whom I have maintained contact.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: CONSTRUCTIONS OF YOUTH

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses three bodies of literature: first, the academic literature on *youth in Thailand*, second, official documents concerning *youth and development* within the Thai and international spheres, and finally the *new anthropology of youth*. Selecting these three literatures has been a somewhat complex process, and the particular ones I have chosen for discussion here (after giving considerable thought to the matter) are those to which the data chapters in this thesis make the most useful contributions. The iterative processes of data collection, choosing literatures and engaging with them, analysing and interpreting data and writing are explored further in the methodology chapter which follows, however I discuss them here briefly in order to explain how and why I came to focus on the literatures I do.

Before setting out for fieldwork my scholarly ‘home’ was the (now not so) new social studies of childhood, and I envisaged that this literature chapter, and indeed the thesis as a whole, would draw upon and contribute exclusively to this. However, the people to whom I had best access and with whom I was best able to build rapport during fieldwork were young people in their mid to late teens and early twenties, and it became clear that I would need to rethink which literature was most suitable for the study. Once I returned from fieldwork I began reading work that was similar to mine in terms of its ethnographic investigation of marginalised urban youth, and the process of locating some of these inspiring individual studies within their broader bodies of literature led to a focus, in an earlier version of this chapter, on ethnographies of urban poverty and subaltern studies of resistance. In addition, once I had settled on the overarching topic of *searching for a better life* it appeared that the literature on youth and social mobility/ social capital might also be relevant, and

so this too became a focus within earlier literature reviews. However, as data analysis proceeded it soon became apparent that these broader literatures were not the most appropriate; they would steer the thesis off into areas of seasoned debate (such as that pertaining to the culture of poverty thesis) in which contentious ideas had already been very well critiqued, and to which it was unclear what my study could contribute. I needed to find different literatures to connect with and a different way of incorporating the selected studies into the discussion.

A short while after returning from fieldwork the World Bank published its 2007 World Development Report – *Development and the Next Generation*. Its focus on youth and development (and the particular form this took) inspired me to explore the extent to which this was a sizeable enough topic to merit exploration in the literature review (which it was), and then to incorporate discussion of it into this chapter. In searching for relevant literatures I also revisited a body of academic literature on youth in Thailand, which I had earlier considered to be of limited relevance because of the considerable differences between the studies therein and my own research. However, I came to realise that these differences could be positive; they meant that I would have something new to offer to a modest but growing area of enquiry.

As the empirical chapters took shape it also became clear that much of my data related to young people's cultural practices, understood in their very broadest sense as 'what young people are concerned with' (Wulff 1995, p.15), and that the new anthropology of youth literature, which had previously been brought to my attention, might be appropriate. On engaging with this literature it quickly became apparent that it was a natural fit with my data and that there was sufficient room within it for my study to make a useful contribution. Also, it was into this body of literature that the selected studies on marginalised urban youth could be most appropriately incorporated.

Discussion now turns to the selected literatures, and in discussing each of them I identify prominent (and problematic) tendencies or areas that are currently under-

researched, and indicate where this thesis makes a particular contribution. In discussing the studies of global youth cultural practice I also highlight those that have proved particularly relevant for my analytical interpretation of data in this research.

YOUTH IN THAILAND

[Thai] youth are exposed to new urban values and peer relationships that put pressure on them to engage in risk behaviour.

(Cash 1999, p.125)

As well as the threat of HIV/AIDS the research [on young, female factory workers in Thailand] also stresses the vulnerabilities towards unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion and STIs other than HIV/AIDS.

(Ford and Kittisuksathit 1996, p.159)

...the young [in Thailand] are vulnerable to external influences, leading to more and more casual sex, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, not to mention the risk of contracting Aids.

(Senator Pongpanitch, quoted in Padkuntod, in *The Nation* 26/09/2004)

A new computer test will help teachers, doctors and psychologists evaluate which risky behaviours [Thai] high-school students are most likely to engage in... The 'risk behaviour filter' program ... can predict which vices a teenager is prone to adopt, such as inappropriate sexual behaviour, drinking and smoking.

(Pongrai, in *The Nation* 25/08/2005)

In the 1980s a cross-disciplinary body of academic literature dealing specifically and explicitly with youth in Thailand emerged, and has been gradually expanding ever since. This began with Anderson and Anderson's ethnography (1986) of Thai Muslim adolescents and was followed by six further studies in the 1990s. By the end of the first decade of the millennium around thirty articles, books and book chapters were dedicated to the study of Thai youth.

This small but growing literature (and its echoes within the English-language Thai media and government circles) is largely characterised by three trends. First, it is marked by a focus on the interrelated notions of risk and destruction. Connected to this there is a tendency to focus on the topic of sexuality and to a lesser but notable extent drugs, and on various risk-related issues pertaining to these. Second, this literature is characterised by the use of research which seeks to explore well-defined, predetermined areas of investigation and by a tendency to employ quantitative methodologies which give priority to the preoccupations of researchers. Third, the literature on Thai youth tends to take insufficient account of issues arising from the experience of occupying positions of socio-economic subordination. Related to this, it pays inadequate attention to the interaction between marginalised youth and the broader frameworks within which their lives are nested. The result of these trends is the production of a partial understanding of the lives of young people, and very little coverage of the experiences of those living in positions of socio-economic disadvantage in Thailand.

Risk, destruction, sex and drugs

The literature on Thai youth focuses overwhelmingly on the interrelated notions of risk and destruction. The opening quotations, taken from academic articles, a national newspaper and a prominent government official, are illustrative of a much broader trend in the conceptualisation and representation of Thai youth as both *at risk* (for example from each other, from inadequate parenting and from 'westernisation') and *a risk* (for example to themselves, other people and the broader moral, cultural and socio-economic orders). This focus on risk in turn gives rise to an

association of Thai youth with destruction – actual or potential. For example, through the widespread focus on sexual risk behaviours young people appear as a destructive force which threatens not only their own health and that of others, but ultimately destroys life itself. Through the emphasis on their vulnerability, for example to ‘external’ (i.e. ‘western’) influences, particularly in the realm of sexual practice, young people become not only the inflictors of destruction but themselves its key victims, their health (as well as their moral integrity) destroyed, and ultimately their lives devastated. Some of the articles in this literature pay particular attention to risk among young *women* (for example Allen et. al. 2003), whilst others focus on young *men* (for example Nelson et. al. 2002). Some deal with the *prevalence* of certain risk behaviours or vulnerabilities (for example Sattah et. al. 2002), whilst others focus on the *contributing factors*, and *destructive consequences* of risk behaviours or vulnerabilities (for example Cash et. al. 1999). Whatever the particular focus, the notions of risk and destruction are prominent in discussions of young people in Thailand. It is also noteworthy that many of the articles concerning Thai youth are published in medical, nursing, paediatric and epidemiological journals, pointing perhaps to a medicalisation of this social phenomenon.

There are a few exceptions to the emphasis on risk and destruction outlined above. First, in their paper presented to the International Population Conference in 2005, Malhotra et. al. explicitly recognise that ‘the same forces that are fuelling risk behaviours are also creating aspirations and ambitions for success and achievement among adolescents’ (p.2). However, the main aim of this paper – entitled *Masculinity and Risk Behavior Among Youth in Thailand* – is to identify the ‘scope, nature, determinants, and implications of risk behaviors’ (ibid.). Second, in her 2004(a) study of the ‘computerized generation’, Thianthai attempts to gain an understanding of the everyday experience of computers among teenagers in Bangkok, and approaches this without reference to risk or destruction.

However, Thainthai's approach here stands out from a more common focus on the risks associated with young people's computer use, illustrated for example in the following excerpt from an article in *The Nation* newspaper entitled 'Game over: Kids spending too much time on computers':

In Thailand, we have seen all-too-familiar stories of youngsters committing crimes such as robbery to get money to play computer games. And we suspect that certain games can breed violence in some.

(*The Nation* 3/11/2009)

Third, in their 1986 study of young Thai Muslims, Anderson and Anderson report on research into adolescents' conceptions of the self, sexuality and autonomy, and again the notions of risk and destruction are absent here. However, this approach is a far cry from the vast majority of later studies dealing with sexuality among Thai youth, which focus overwhelmingly on the risks associated with sexual practice and attitudes, and the resulting damage caused to selves and society. Lastly, in her 1997 and 1999 articles concerning young female migrant workers in Bangkok, Mills focuses on young women's consumption and leisure activities, exploring the relationship between these cultural practices, identity construction and socio-economic marginalisation, an approach which stands firmly outside the risk and destruction paradigm. This work is discussed in greater detail later on.

As noted above, much of the focus on risk and destruction is expressed through discussions of youth sexuality. Within this, several sub-topics emerge as key sites of investigation: risks associated with sexual behaviour and HIV-AIDS/ STDs (for example, Morrison 2004), risks connected to teenage pregnancy (for example, Manopaiboon et. al. 2003), early sexual intercourse and the associated risk of cervical cancer (for example, Kanato and Saranrittichai 2006), condom use and the risks associated with its non use (for example, Thato et. al. 2003), increases in and risks related to premarital sex between partners (for example, Podhisita et. al. 2004),

sex education needs in light of risks faced and posed by young people's sexual practices (for example, Vuttanont et. al. 2006), sexual health service needs in light of risks connected to young people's sexual behaviour (for example, Ford and Kittisuksathit 1996) and what is referred to as the 'gender double standard' in sexual matters and the particular risks faced by young Thai women due to this (for example, Tangmunkongvorakul et. al. 2005). In discussions of these sub-topics, references to the destructive consequences of the risks that young people pose and face abound, with frequent mention of long term physical and mental health problems, infections, physical trauma, death, morbidity, mortality, suicide and depression to name but a few. These in turn contribute to an overall sense that young people in Thai society are bent on both self destruction and destroying the health and lives of others.

In addition to a focus on sexuality, a proportion of the risk and destruction-oriented literature is concerned with drug use, and in particular with the risk factors leading to it (for example, see Sattah et. al. 2002) and the relationship between drug injection and HIV-AIDS (for example, see Nelson, et. al. 2002).

That a concerted literature on Thai youth has begun to emerge in the last few decades and that this should emphasise risk and destruction with particular reference to sex and drugs is, in a certain sense, unsurprising. Complex combinations of socio-economic, cultural, migratory and epidemiological processes have brought about potentially harmful as well as positive changes in Thai society over the last quarter of the twentieth century, and it is argued that young people are disproportionately affected by these, or at least experience them in specific ways. For example, see Thaianthai (2004b) on the increased likelihood of contracting HIV/AIDS during adolescence, German (2006) on the high rate of methamphetamine use among adolescents, and Ford and Kittisuksathit (1996) on the increase in sexual experience among young women in light of the availability of factory work in the context of Thailand's rapid industrialisation. In addition, it is widely noted that adolescence is the life stage when people commonly become sexually active, and that in the Thai context initiation into sexual activity is happening at an earlier phase of adolescence than in the past. Further, the history of western sociological enquiry is one of seeking

to study and alleviate the *problems* associated with modernity and more specifically with industrial capitalism (Carrier 1996), and this has arguably left its legacy on those writing about other societies that have experienced more recent capitalist industrialisation such as Thailand. Tied to this, the history of youth research in the west, in particular in the United States, is one rooted in a model of deviance (as will be discussed later in this chapter), a paradigm which appears to hold sway over many of the commentaries discussed here. Therefore focusing on sexuality and risk in discussions of Thai youth is in certain ways to be expected. A Foucauldian reading of this emphasis on sexuality and deviance (and their medicalisation) would no doubt point to the ways in which social-scientific research and related professional practices (for example in the health and education systems) establish sexual norms (and by implication deviances) as a way of exerting social control over the objects of their knowledge, who in turn become self-regulating through the internalisation of those norms (Gutting 2008). Whilst it may be unsurprising that the literature on Thai youth is preoccupied with risk and destruction as expressed through discussions of sex and drugs, it leaves a lot unknown and unsaid about experiences and perceptions other than those related to these issues.

Externally defined topics

Of the articles, books, book chapters and academic reports on Thai youth accessed in the research for the present discussion, the vast majority appear to report on research that was relatively ‘closed’, that is which investigated predefined topics selected by researchers, even if the research was designed to elicit young people’s experiences of and perspectives on particular issues. Only one (Lyttleton’s 2000 work on the shifting bounds of adolescent sexuality) appears to be part of a much broader and more open-ended piece of research. In some cases this could be a result of a certain ‘cleaning up’ in the writing process, whereby authors claim to have been guided by particular research questions at the outset rather than acknowledging the iterative and sometimes retrospective nature of formulating research questions. However, in the majority of cases this closed approach appears to dominate the literature, certainly if reported methodologies are taken at face value.

Related to this, the majority of the literature dealing with Thai youth is quantitative in design and provides little by way of in depth understandings of young people's own perspectives and experiences or analyses of how these perspectives are located within wider (moral, cultural, socio-economic) frameworks and produced through wider sets of discourses. Of the literature on which the present discussion is based, nineteen report on large-scale survey findings, seven discuss findings from semi-structured interviews and focus groups, one reports on a mixed-method study, one comprises a documentary assessment and one reports on national youth-oriented policy. Only a few are based on long term ethnographic fieldwork through which researchers have attempted to garner a more emic perspective.

In a sense the dominance of quantitative methodologies and resulting etic understandings, and certainly the pre-defining of research questions, are understandable and indeed important in light of the pressing health and social issues affecting young people and the desire to produce targeted, 'representative' knowledge aimed at making relevant policy recommendations, and given the related funding constraints on social research activity. However, what this means is that the questions asked of young people in the production of knowledge about them, and therefore the topics deemed worthy of attention in relation to their lives, are those of people other than Thai youth themselves.

Socio-economic positioning

Of the studies discussed here only a few refer explicitly to 'class' or 'socio-economic background/ status' as significant dimensions structuring the lives of young people. For example, one focuses on the computer use of middle and upper class youth attending high school (Thainathai 2004a), one explores the sex education needs of teenagers purportedly representing a range of socio-economic backgrounds attending secondary school (Vuttanont et. al. 2006), one reports on youth risk behaviour amongst young people accessed through high schools, slum communities and juvenile institutions (Ruangkanchanasetr et. al. 2005), one discusses the risk of premarital sex among young people from a stratified sample of communities

(Podhisita et. al. 2004) and one investigates gender and class differences in young people's sexuality and HIV/AIDS risk-taking behaviours (Thainthai 2004b). Where differences between 'lower' and 'upper' class young people are identified, there is a tendency towards viewing those of lower socio-economic positioning as more prone to risk-taking behaviours, as the following suggests:

Lower class young people tended to say they engaged in premarital sex at an earlier age than those from middle and upper class backgrounds... Lower class young people ... did not realise that their personal sexual activities put them at risk. Usually they made no attempt to check out or screen sexual partners and used little protection... Many of the lower-class young people interviewed stated that they did not attend school regularly, having dropped out of education to help their parents. Others had run away from home for a few months, which resulted in gaps and inconsistencies in their health and sex education.

(Thainthai 2004, pp.196-198)

Echoes of this contention can be seen in the work of Podhisita et. al.:

Later onset of sexual intercourse and lower teen pregnancy rates are related to higher family incomes... Likewise, higher levels of parental education have been associated with lower adolescent sexual activity, delayed sexual initiation, safer sexual practices and lower risks of pregnancy.

(Podhisita et. al. 2004, p.2)

The majority of studies of young people in Thailand either make no mention of socio-economic position or point to it briefly or indirectly for example through reference to agricultural background, work status or attendance at vocational school (taken to signify lower socio-economic status). Even in these cases, discussions

following the acknowledgement of differences or particularities in socio-economic background are not sufficiently sensitive to issues arising from the experience of occupying positions of socio-economic subordination. Linked to this, the literature on Thai youth is on the whole united by a lack of attention to the complex ways in which young people – and especially those in positions of marginalisation – interact with wider structures. In addition, there is a lack of explicit or detailed attention to young people's experiences of relationships with others. Where detailed attention is given to this the focus tends to be on those of a sexual nature with partners, in line with the focus on sexuality identified above (for example, Thongpriwan 2009).

The overall result of these tendencies within the literature on Thai youth is the construction of a partial picture of the lives of young people in Thailand, and an all but missing picture of those in positions of socio-economic deprivation and their relationships to structures of power and other people. The present thesis contributes to this body of literature, in three ways in particular. First, it focuses on young people in positions of socio-economic disadvantage, linking their experiences, practices, desires and perceptions (including of themselves) to salient elements of the context in which they are located and viewing them as embedded within multiple sets of relationships. It thereby moves an under-researched group to the centre-stage of analysis and explores its members' interaction with some of the wider moral, cultural and socio-economic frameworks within which they operate and with certain key others. Second, the thesis reports on open-ended ethnographic fieldwork (discussed more fully in the methodology chapter that follows), which was designed to explore issues of importance and interest to young people themselves and which therefore meant that research topics were identified and questions formulated in response to the lived experiences and preoccupations of participants. Third, in light of the above, this thesis does not place primary emphasis on sexuality or drugs or the risk and destruction seen to define these. In fact, what was found through conducting broad-based, open-ended fieldwork was a very strong orientation towards building a better life.

It is not my intention here to suggest that the literature on Thai youth, with its focus on risk behaviours and their destructive consequences, is unwarranted. Rather, it is my contention that such a focus provides a partial understanding, and that conceptualising young people (especially those in positions of socio-economic marginalisation) outside of the risk and destruction paradigm reveals more complex dimensions of experience, which may in turn shed a little light on some of the broader processes associated with Thailand's socio-economic transformation.

Standing in marked contrast to the majority of the literature discussed in this section there are two studies, written by the same author, which provide excellent insights into the lives of marginalised youth in the Thai context. Mills' 1997 and 1999 articles, based on ethnographic fieldwork and follow-up visits conducted in the late 1980s and 1990s, concentrate on young female migrants (mostly in their late teens and early twenties) from rural Thailand working in low-wage, low status jobs in the industrial sector in Bangkok. Through an analysis of selected cultural practices (specifically commodity consumption and group excursions), Mills offers a rich and critical analysis of participants' interactions with some of the broader cultural, moral and socio-economic structures in which their lives are embedded. In this, attention is directed specifically towards the agency of marginalised young women, and in particular towards their active construction of certain ('modern' and 'good') identities and the effects of this on their relationship to the socio-economic hierarchy. For example in the conclusion to her earlier article she observes how:

Attention to workers' commodity consumption points not only to some of the cultural conflicts involved in labor migration but also to an important arena wherein women can mobilize dominant symbols and meanings to serve their own interests and to stretch, if only temporarily, the limits of their subordination

(Mills 1997, p.54)

Mills' mobilisation of concepts such as hegemony, ideology, domination, marginalisation and exploitation demonstrates the sensitivity of her research to the particular and significant constraints experienced by participants in light of their socio-economic positioning, whilst her focus on, for example, self constructions, aspirations for particular kinds of personhood and the continual selection between potential self-images points to her recognition of agency, albeit as exercised in highly constrained circumstances. Further, her frequent acknowledgements of the ambivalence, tensions, contradictions and nuances that attend participants' cultural practices reveal the sensitivity of her research to the complexities that exist at the interface of marginalised agency and structures of domination. In this, and in particular in her focus on commodity consumption, Mills speaks in part against 'the lingering sense [within the literature on women's global entry into industrial labour] that commodity consumption by working-class actors ... entails a kind of complicity in their exploitation' (1997, p.40). Mills' work provides a detailed and critical analysis of the experiences of a particular group of marginalised youth in Thailand; a welcome departure from the majority of studies on Thai youth described above.

A further illuminating piece of research into the lives of marginalised young people in Thailand was conducted by Montgomery in the mid 1990s. Whilst this work focuses on children as opposed to youth, it is worth mentioning here as it is also one of the few studies that, in certain ways, stands in contrast to the mainstream literature on young people in Thailand. Montgomery's 2000 and 2001 publications, based on ethnographic research in a Thai slum, focus on the lives of child prostitutes. Through detailed analysis of their narratives concerning who they are and what they do, and of their experiences within the family and community, she provides an insight into the exercise of agency in a context of severe exploitation. Whilst Montgomery concentrates on participants as active agents (for example with regard to their constructions of themselves in moral terms) and thereby offers a corrective to the media and NGO reports that more commonly emphasise their 'utter passivity' (2001, p.69), she locates their narratives and experiences firmly within a context of structural oppression. Here this includes a combination of gendered cultural norms surrounding filial obligation, a labour market that provides inadequate remuneration for the families of poor children and ultimately socio-economic inequality upheld by

a free market and a neglectful state. In this context, agency can be seen to entail negative and reproductive consequences as evidenced for example in parents' pimping of their children and children's pimping of each other. Montgomery's research is also instructive in its identification of participants' experiences of kin and peer networks and its detailed discussions of the ways in which these networks function to sustain exploitation – a challenge to conventional representations of child prostitutes as 'abandoned' by their families. Interestingly, Montgomery's work can also be understood as a challenge to the focus on relationships as resource, found for example within some of the literature on street children and social capital (for example, Stephenson 2001). Whilst Montgomery and Mills have both provided excellent and insightful ethnographies of marginalised young people in Thailand, I would argue that their research deserves much wider recognition within the modest but growing mainstream literature on Thai youth.

YOUTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Alongside the increasing academic attention to youth in Thailand, the past few decades have witnessed a growing concern on the part of the Thai government and development institutions with issues around 'youth and development', manifested in the creation of a governmental framework to address this, and in the publication of several reports concerning the situation of young people and youth policy in the country. This concern with youth and development in the Thai context can be understood in part with reference to the multiple and complex transformations that have taken place in the country over the past few decades, which are claimed to have affected youth disproportionately (discussed in the previous section). It can also be understood with reference to the attention given to youth within the wider international development community, and both of these processes can in turn be understood as part of a global drive to ensure that young people channel their energies into productive work and thereby stem social unrest and serve the needs of the global economy. It is also no coincidence that the current focus on youth and development comes at a time when threats of global terrorism are linked in the popular and official imaginations to young people (in particular those of the Muslim faith) and concern to eradicate the risk they are thought to pose is high.

As well as being strongly marked by the same emphasis on risk and destruction identified within the academic literature (here framed in terms of the threat that young people may pose to economic development and stability), the attention to youth and development within the Thai governmental and international development spheres is characterised by a further two tendencies. First there is a tendency to focus on youth as a productive resource and development as the creation of productive labour, and a related assumption that aspirations are restricted to the realm of productive activity. Second, the attention to youth and development is marked by a contention (intended as a positive message) that ‘it’s up to you(th)’ (World Bank 2007, p.vii); that young people should be responsible for bringing about their own development and that this can be achieved as long as young people make the ‘right’ choices and act accordingly. In addition, this emerging discourse is characterised by the use of macro-level data, which may provide useful information on certain national and global trends but offer nothing in the way of critical insight into the perceptions, experiences and practices of young people themselves. This section discusses these tendencies. Whilst attention is given to a range of documents, particular consideration is given to the World Bank’s 2007 World Development Report, *Development and the Next Generation*, as this represents a dominant element of the discourse on youth and development. There are many things that could, and indeed should be said about this discourse, and other avenues of critique that could be taken, however this discussion focuses on those which bear particular relevance to the empirical chapters of this thesis.

According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP 2000), the Thai governmental framework for addressing youth and development issues has, over the years, included the National Youth Office, the Office of Youth Promotion, the Commission of the Promotion and Development of Youth, the National Council for Child and Youth Development, the National Youth Commission and the National Youth Bureau. The ministries dealing with employment and health, and especially education, have also paid significant attention to youth in their policies and planning activities. The history of each of these

ministries, departments and offices, and their relationships with one another is rather complicated in light of the numerous military coups and changes of government that have taken place in Thailand over the past few decades and the resulting restructuring of government institutions and responsibilities therein. However, tumultuous though its history may be, the existence of a dedicated, if shifting, framework for addressing youth and in particular issues around youth and development, stands as testimony to the importance of this within the Thai body politic.

Youth as productive resource and ‘development’ as the creation of productive labour

From within its evolving institutional framework concerning youth and development the Thai government has issued several national youth policies, a long term (twenty year) plan referred to as the *Prospective Policies and Planning for the Development of Youth (1982-2001)*, and several five year child and youth development plans which grew out of Thailand’s national economic and social development plans. The unavailability of these policy documents in English precludes a detailed discussion of them here, however, limited secondary sources allow for some preliminary observations.

It has been noted that from 1994 onwards Thailand’s youth policies identified ‘youth as an important human resource in society, which required development so that they could contribute to national development’ (UNESCAP 2000, p.9). This emphasis on youth as productive resource is also manifested in the discourse of Thai government officials. For example, in his address to the first World Conference of Ministries Responsible for Youth, Prasit Damrongchai, Permanent Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister, stated that:

...in order to develop full potential of Thai youth to be competent in the labour market, special measures on learning process are developed to enable the students to have adequate knowledge and basic skills for employment

(Damrongchai, 11/08/1998)

The Thai government's attention to issues around youth and development, and the focus therein on developing young people's productive labour in the service of the economy is mirrored within the Thai-oriented texts of some of the dominant international development institutions operating in the country, as well as within those concerned with the global youth community.

In 2000, UNESCAP produced a report on the 'youth situation' in Thailand, a publication which grew out of the UNESCAP-initiated project *Capacity-building in HRD [human resource development] policy-making for youth in Asia and the Pacific*. The introductory message to this report reads: 'Youth are key agents of socio-economic development and technological innovation' (p.vii). The document is divided into six chapters (Youth and Development, Youth Education, Youth Health, Youth Employment, Youth Participation and Future Directions for Youth Development), and the focus on young people as productive resource runs throughout. For example, in the discussion of youth education we are told that:

Thailand's relatively weak human resources base was a major contributing factor to the economic crisis which began in 1997... Educational curricula... require strengthening to ensure their relevance to the rapidly changing needs of the economy (p.27)

In the concluding chapter it is argued that:

Greater coordination is needed between the education and employment sectors to ensure that graduates meet the demand for labour in an increasingly competitive international environment (p.116)

The focus on young people as productive resource can also be found in the World Bank's 2008 Thailand Social Monitor (TSM08). The topic of this document – the latest of six such reports – is youth and development, inspired by the focus on this in the World Bank's 2007 World Development Report (WDR07). The 2008 Thailand Social Monitor is subtitled *Development and the Next Generation* and is modelled on the analytical framework and structure of WDR07.

The stated aim of the TSM08 is to 'inform the development of a comprehensive youth development strategy in Thailand' (Benveniste 2008, p4). It has at its core three chapters, each of which deals with a 'key transition' in youth; 'growing up healthy', 'learning for work and life', and 'moving from school to work'. Each of these chapters report on national statistics and discuss young people's vulnerabilities regarding a particular transition, and make policy recommendations designed to expand opportunities, enhance capabilities and provide second chances therein. The focus on young people as productive resource runs throughout these core chapters, as well as the introductory and concluding ones. At the outset, in arguing the case for the relevance and 'urgency' of dealing with youth issues, the report states that:

the abundant young labor on which Thailand has relied for economic growth will soon be in shortage. To maintain its future growth and competitiveness, Thailand will need to place renewed emphasis on strengthening the capabilities of its young people and boosting productive opportunities for them. (World Bank 2008, p.viii)

In its discussion of growing up healthy, the rationale for attending to young people's health is spelled out; 'Influencing health habits and lifestyle formation during youth is critical for avoiding the loss of productive human capital' (p.ix). Similarly, in its discussion of 'learning for work and life', the report stresses the importance of 'Improving the quality and relevance of education to prepare youth to meet the demands of the labor market' (p.x). Further, in its discussion of 'moving from school to work', the report states that 'some youth drop out of school and start work too early, which can affect future productivity and income' (p.xi). The message here is clear: it is in their capacity as productive resources that young people are valued, or of interest.

It is in the World Bank's 2007 World Development Report, *Development and the Next Generation* that the notion of youth as productive resource emerges with particular intensity. Despite some claims that the document represents a 'pioneering' journey into new territory for the World Bank (for example, Lundberg 2006, in Moore 2006, p.10), the text remains steadfastly rooted in conventional Bank ideology, and with particular reference to the present discussion, in the focus on human beings as 'capital' serving the needs of national and global economies.

Aimed at governments and policy makers in developing countries, the WDR07 has been heralded as a 'landmark' report which takes the Bank into previously uncharted waters such as the espousal of an analytical framework which claims to attend, for the first time, to the 'demand side' of the economic equation (ibid.). With its unprecedented attention to young people and its claims to determine the 'youth friendliness' of policy climates (through the application of a conceptual framework neatly packaged into an optical metaphor), the report may represent a welcome consideration of a hitherto neglected category. The recurrent use of statistics, graphs, tables, charts, scatter diagrams, text and quotations from young people, as well as the deployment of buzzwords such as 'participation', 'agency' and 'wellbeing' may also make for an initially convincing (if ultimately impenetrable) read.

However, beneath the claims of novelty and the report's somewhat slippery evidence base, and indeed at the very heart of its 'youth friendly' analytical framework, the notion of youth as productive resource looms large, a notion that sits squarely within traditional World bank ideology. The report is replete with references to the task of building human capital in youth and to the importance of this in generating economic growth. It marks out five areas of youth transition (education, work, health, family formation and citizenship), and in the chapters dedicated to each of these (as well as in the surrounding chapters and in the underpinning conceptual framework of 'broadening opportunities', 'enhancing capabilities' and 'offering second chances') the emphasis lies squarely on turning global youth into productive labour. In the overview we are told that 'labor is the main asset of the poor' and as such needs to be made more productive (p.2). In the introductory chapter the report states that 'If made well, decisions about [the five] transitions will develop, safeguard, and properly deploy human capital' (p.5). In the chapter outlining the report's analytical framework it states that: 'Human capital, once developed, needs to be used productively' (p.50). In turn, the report is clear that: 'The human capital formed in youth – whether in skill levels, or health, or civic and societal engagement – is also an important determinant of long-term growth' (p.29).

The Bank's attention to youth itself may very well be new, and the sheer amount of textual and numerical information provided may at first glance function to bolster the report's credibility. However, the way in which youth are constructed throughout the document does not represent the departure into uncharted waters that the report's authors and others claim it to be; young people are clearly presented and valued in their capacity as 'capital' serving the interests of national and global economies.

In the UK the publication of *Development and the Next Generation* created a ripple of discursive activity within the INGO industry and the political establishment (as well as within the academic community⁸), seen for example in the organisation of two discussion events hosted and attended by development institutions and senior

⁸ See for example Luttrell-Rowland (2007) and Kamat (2007)

civil servants⁹. Here, the echo of youth as productive resource resounds clearly; ‘we have a brief window of opportunity to harness the talents of this youthful generation and inspire rapid economic growth’ (Mitchell 2006, p.2).

Aside from the moral questions surrounding the valuing of young people in the developing world (or anybody anywhere for that matter) as human capital inputs useful for economic growth, focusing on young people as productive resources allows only for a very partial understanding of their experiences as economic agents, let alone of their experiences in other interrelated realms of activity. It is true that within the documents discussed here there is mention of other aspects of young people’s incorporation into market structures, for example in the references to young people’s consumption habits in the TSM08 (p.4) and in the WDR07 (p.33). However, discussion of this is both extremely brief and strongly rooted in the risk-destruction paradigm discussed in the previous section of this chapter. An exception to this is the discussion of consumption and global youth culture in the United Nation’s 2005 World Youth Report, which takes a more nuanced and holistic approach to understanding and presenting the complexities of young people’s lives in contemporary contexts.

Whilst it may be unsurprising that the documents discussed here emphasise the productive sphere, and important to attend to this, viewing young people largely in terms of productive activity is neither the only, nor the most illuminating, way in which to understand their lives (Mills 1997). In fact, as the first empirical chapter in this thesis will demonstrate it is in the exploration of practices around *consumption* that important and interesting dimensions of experience are brought to light.

⁹ The first event, held on 21 November 2006, was hosted by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) and Peace Child International (PCI). Notes of this event are available from: <http://www.odi.org.uk/events/2006/11/21/362-meeting-report.pdf>
The second event, held on 5 December 2006, was hosted by the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Development (APGOOD) and the ODI. Notes, presentations and sound files of this are available from: <http://www.odi.org.uk/events/apgood/index>

Related to the focus on youth as productive resource, the Thai-oriented and international discourse on youth and development is marked by a conceptualisation of development as the creation of productive labour. It has been noted, in relation to Thailand's eighth national economic and social development plan, out of which the country's national youth policy evolved, that: 'The plan stipulates human resources development as the goal for national development (UNESCAP 2000, p.3). This notion is strongly echoed in the TSM08. For example, the opening paragraph to the executive summary of this report states that:

Ensuring that young people become healthy, educated and productive workers, citizens and parents needs to be regarded at the center of the country's development strategy.

(World Bank 2008, p.viii)

Note here the order in which young people are conceptualised, an order that runs throughout the document and is reflected too in the WDR07; first as workers and only then as citizens or (future) parents. The notion of development as the creation of productive labour is also emphasised in the WDR07, although here the ultimate goal is economic growth and poverty reduction (usually in that order):

... poor countries...need policies and institutions that broaden the opportunities for young people to develop their human capital and use it productively in work. Indeed, the overall skills of the labor force, built largely in childhood and youth, strongly affect the climate for investment in firms.

(World Bank 2007, p.5)

One of the implications of viewing development as the creation of productive labour is that legitimate goals and aspirations on the part of young people become confined to the realm of productive activity in the service of the economy, whilst other goals

and ambitions are positioned outside the realm of development or dismissed altogether as a threat to it. This can be seen for example in the way in which identity-building is aligned with irrationality, 'risky behavior' and 'violence' (World Bank 2007, p.59), and in the way in which commodity consumption is aligned with 'negative behaviors', 'frustration', 'disillusionment' and 'illegal conduct' (World Bank 2008, pp.4-5). However, as this thesis demonstrates, for the participants in this research the interrelated practices of commodity consumption and identity-building are actually integral aspects of a better life, and it is in the analysis of young people's practices towards these goals that important dimensions of experience are revealed.

'It's up to you(th)': young people developing themselves

As discussed above, the conceptualisation within the WDR07 of youth as human capital serving the needs of the economy makes somewhat of a mockery of claims that the report represents a novel approach for the Bank. Its conformity to conventional Bank ideology is also upheld in another key arena; in the notion that 'it's up to you(th)' to develop themselves – in particular through 'good' decision-making and related behaviour in the five transition areas. This notion forms a core component of the report's analytical framework, and can be found within a discrete highlighted section at the end of the document as well as in the repeated references to 'choice' and 'decision-making' found throughout, and is prominent despite the acknowledgement of the role of government policy and programming in bringing about development goals.

The second element of the WDR07's three-pronged analytical framework (referred to as a 'policy lens') focuses on enhancing young people's capabilities. In the overview of the framework this is described as follows: 'The second youth lens focuses on the need to help young people decide more capably among life's opportunities' (p.15). In close proximity to this introduction to enhancing capabilities, at the right hand margin of the page, a quote from a young person reads:

‘[The] majority of youth in Georgia now realize that the key factor . . . in finding proper jobs lies in themselves’.

This policy lens is applied in each of the five transition areas; young people, we are told, must become capable of making better education choices, finding work, practicing healthy behavior, preparing for parenthood, and exercising citizenship for development to ensue. Through the mobilisation of this policy lens, emphasis is placed firmly on young people determining development outcomes through the decisions they make and the actions they take. There are two fundamental assumptions at work here; first that ‘development’ can be achieved through personal endeavour and second that as long as young people *choose* to learn, work, practice healthy behaviour, prepare for parenting and exercise citizenship and *act* in accordance with their decisions then positive outcomes will follow.

The notion that ‘it’s up to you(th)’ and the assumptions this entails are not limited to this second policy lens; indeed, as the Bank’s president notes in the forward to the report, the entire conceptual framework is built upon an understanding of youth as agents of their own development: ‘The Report identifies three policy directions for helping youth develop themselves’ (p.xi). In this sense, broadening opportunities and offering second chances – the other two policy lenses – are needed to assist youth in taking the process of development into their own hands.

The idea that young people should assume responsibility for their own development is particularly pronounced in the closing section of the document – the last thing to be read and therefore to leave a lasting impression on readers. This spotlight piece, entitled ‘It’s up to you(th) – taking action for development’, addresses itself directly to young people, and its opening paragraph reads as follows:

...This spotlight addresses young people directly about how to develop their own capabilities so they can seize the opportunities provided to them, but

especially, so they can create opportunities for themselves, for other young people, and for everyone.

(World Bank 2007, p.225)

The highlighted text box directly below this opening paragraph presents the motto of ‘four young women from villages in Sri Lanka who are helping young people and all people in their villages overcome poverty’. The motto reads:

People will decide their lives

People will identify their problems

People will lead to self-help

People will share the fruits

And below this, young people in the developing world are told in no uncertain terms that they:

... must seize the initiative and invest – by developing your own capacity, and taking action to make youth investments successful... No matter who you are, you can take action as young people to make life better for yourself.

This notion that ‘it’s up to you(th)’ to make life better for themselves also resonates throughout the WDR07 in the recurring references to young people’s decision-making, empowerment and participation in the development process. Again, the Bank’s mobilisation of such terms here does not signify a departure into radical waters (as one might be forgiven for thinking given the seemingly radical language of empowerment). Rather, in the Bank’s vision, young people are to become empowered to maintain the global socio-economic order; they are to make decisions that build their human capital so that they contribute to economic growth and, as we saw above, their participation is required to better serve the needs of the national and

global economies. Thus, what may be intended as a positive message is quickly revealed as a burdening of those already struggling with the task of building better lives.

It is true that the WDR07 stresses the need for government policy and action across the five transition areas, and that similarly, in the other documents discussed in this section, the state is seen as central in the process of individual and national development. However, a close reading of the document reveals something akin to what Moore, in his (1999) critique of the World Bank's 1997 World Development Report, calls a 'contradictory melange of anti-statism and managerialism' (Moore 1999, p.61). Much of the government policy and action proposed in *Development and the Next Generation* transpires to be about handing the responsibility for development – or at least the cost of it – to individuals. Government policies in each of the five transition areas, such as introducing user-fees in schools, reducing the cost of dismissing workers, facilitating optimal health decisions, improving access to family planning, and facilitating participation in civil society all reflect a vision of the state as withdrawing to such a distance that young people are left to determine their own development outcomes.

Echoes of the notion that responsibility for development lies with young people themselves – and that the role of policy and programming is to support this – can also be found in the World Bank's TSM08, for example in its espousal of the same policy lenses adopted in its WDR07 and in its conceptualisation of youth as decision-makers and investors in their own futures.

As will be discussed in chapter five of this thesis, the notion that it is 'up to you(th)' to forge better material futures for themselves is also a strong feature of participants' experiences and narratives. However, as the chapter explores, there are unintended, ironic and reproductive outcomes of thinking and acting in line with the notion of achieving development through personal endeavour.

The documents discussed in this section – UNESCAP's (2000) *Youth in Thailand* report, the World Bank's (2008) *Thailand Social Monitor* and the World Bank's (2007) *World Development Report* – are united in their use of macro-level data and in their uncritical approach to that data. Where the micro level is addressed it is through the marginal presentation of quotes from young people (indicative either of a genuine attempt to give expression to the voices of youth, or of a box-ticking exercise, depending on your position). Whatever these quotes are taken to indicate, they appear completely disconnected from the contexts in which they were produced, including that of significant power imbalances between young people and World Bank researchers, the process of selecting quotes for presentation in the final report, and the broader discursive frameworks within which young people's narratives emerge.

That these documents deal with macro-level data concerning youth and development, such as statistics regarding educational attainment, employment levels and health behaviours, and are uncritical in their use of it, comes as little surprise – their stated purpose after all is to provide national or global situation analyses and policy recommendations and this leaves little room for engaging with the complexities of the micro level. Further, these statistics are no doubt useful for those designing policies and programmes and allocating funding for their implementation. However, whilst such data may provide useful and important information on relevant national, regional and global trends concerning youth and development, very different insights are produced through a micro-level, in-depth exploration of young people's lives. This thesis provides such an exploration, in particular asking what a better life means to participants, and in the final empirical chapter investigating what happens even when they think, choose and act in the ways sanctioned by the emerging youth and development discourses.

THE NEW ANTHROPOLOGY OF YOUTH

Young people in developing countries (as well as developed ones) have also become the focus of attention within a small but growing body of literature on global youth cultural practice. Prompted by ‘modernity and globalisation and the ambivalent engagement of youth in local contexts’ (Bucholtz 2002, p.525), this new anthropology of youth focuses on young people as active producers of culture, and is concerned to a significant degree with constructions of culture and identity in contexts characterised by incorporation into the global economy.

To offer an authoritative definition of ‘culture’ in this context would be to run the risk of undermining the very ideological, theoretical and methodological foundations upon which this body of literature is being built; here, culture is constantly in the process of being produced, negotiated and defined by diverse young people in contexts that are also perpetually shifting. However, it can be stated that in very broad terms ‘youth cultural practice’ refers to the activities and related objects and meanings that young people engage in on an everyday basis.

In the following discussion, as well as dealing with scholarly work self-consciously produced within this growing body of literature, I draw on studies produced within other fields of enquiry (specifically urban ethnography and subaltern resistance studies), whose main focus may not be on ‘youth culture’ per se but which deal directly with issues concerning global youth cultural practice and which are particularly relevant for my approach to the data in this research. In this discussion I do not claim to offer an exhaustive account of the new anthropology of youth; rather, my purpose is to provide an outline of the central preoccupations and themes within this growing body of literature, and in particular to highlight a problematic tendency within it, and point to some possible ways in which this tendency may be countered. Before turning to the studies selected for discussion, I set the scene by providing an overview of the prominent intellectual roots of the new anthropology of youth within early anthropology and within sociology and cultural studies.

Early anthropology and the focus on transition and enculturation

Within early anthropological research (i.e. that produced in the first half of twentieth century), young people were studied with a view to understanding the rites of passage practices in different cultures and thereby understanding the processes by which cultural norms are passed from one generation to the next; the ways in which ‘adults guide adolescents into full cultural membership’ (Bucholtz 2002, p.529). Thus, whilst young people were present in early anthropological texts their presence was of a somewhat silent nature; they appeared as objects of study and were investigated for what they could reveal about the cultures in which they were located (thought to be bounded and homogenous); about the process of enculturation and transitions to adulthood. This focus owed much of its analytic heritage to the discipline of psychology and its pervasive narrative on adolescence as a period of heightened biological and psychological transition (Griffin 2001; Bucholtz 2002). Within this focus on transition a prominent debate centred on whether or not, or the extent to which, transition entails crisis (Griffin 2001, Bucholtz 2002). The crisis model was strongly rejected by Mead (1928) in her foundational (and controversial) study of adolescents in Samoa, in which she argued that the model of upheaval and distress in transitions to adulthood was not universal.

Approaching the issue of young people and culture from the point of view of transitions to adulthood and full cultural membership is critiqued by the new anthropology of youth on the basis that it tends to construct young people as incomplete and falsely posits a notion of completeness in adulthood, and that it obscures young people’s cultural agency – in particular the informal ways in which they socialise themselves and each other as cultural practitioners (Bucholtz 2002; Wulff 1995; Caputo 1995). The new anthropology of youth rejects the tendency to focus on liminality, conceptualises young people as cultural agents and explores their agentive cultural practices in diverse contexts across the globe.

Sociology and Cultural Studies and the focus on deviance and resistance

Within sociology and cultural studies, early research on youth cultures (often understood and labelled as ‘subcultures’ in recognition of unequal class positioning) did recognise young people as cultural agents, however this research was beset with different yet no less problematic tendencies – in particular the tendency to focus on deviance or resistance within youth cultural practice.

In the United States the study of youth cultures began as an outgrowth of criminology and delinquency studies within sociology (Bucholtz 2002; Nayak 2003), and thus had a focus on deviance written into it from the outset. Within early criminological studies it was commonplace to view deviance as a result of individual personalities, and it was against this notion that researchers in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Chicago rallied. From the 1920s onwards the Chicago scholars produced a plethora of urban ethnographies into the ‘shadier recesses of polite society’ (Nayak 2003, p.14), and through these argued that juvenile delinquency should be understood as the product of social structures and physical environments in the inner city, not as the result of individual traits. This notion was retained in the work of later Chicago scholars, whilst eventually there was a proposed move away from the discourse of deviance altogether (Nayak 2003).

It was in part against the academic focus on deviance, as well as against negative mass media portrayals of young people, that scholars in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham rallied in the 1970s. The Birmingham scholars sought to counter the prevailing image of youth cultures as deviant using mainly textual and semiotic analyses (although a few ethnographic studies were conducted). For example, Hebdige, in his (1979) work on subcultures and sartorial style explored how young people’s oppositional practices are ‘expressed obliquely, in style... at the profoundly superficial level of appearances’ (Hebdige 1979, p.17). The Birmingham School’s theoretical perspective was based on Marxist and neo-Marxist understandings of class and class conflict and on a Gramscian

understanding of hegemony (Wulff 1995; Nayak 2003; Nilan and Feixa 2006)¹⁰. These theoretical approaches informed the Birmingham School's depiction of a social system – characteristic of late industrial society – wherein dominant classes create and define hegemonic culture to enhance their positions of power and wherein subordinate classes resist this through the creation of 'sub' cultures. Thus the Birmingham School researchers reconceptualised what had previously been understood in terms of deviance, as young people's resistance to class-based oppression through (sub)cultural practices. Here, eminent volumes such as *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson 1977) can be seen as emblematic of a broad concern to understand youth (sub)cultural practice as resistance.

Of particular interest for this thesis is the work of the Birmingham scholar Paul Willis, and specifically his (1977) ethnography of working class 'lads' in a school setting, in which he utilises cultural reproduction theory to understand their 'condemnation' into working class jobs. At the time Willis was writing, a good deal of sociological study was preoccupied with the question of why class inequalities persisted in society, and those writing within the field of education were particularly concerned with the ways in which the education system functioned to reproduce such inequality. Whilst structural theories of reproduction posited that class inequalities persisted (i.e. working class children only went on to get working class jobs) because capitalist production required it to be so, some were dissatisfied with such structural determinism and the implied lack of agency; with the way in which 'agency become[s] merely a reflex of structural determination' (Willis 1977, p.111). Those dissatisfied with structural theories argued that the working classes are far from passive bearers and transmitters of ideology, that they are – and should be understood as – active producers of meaning. However, they also wanted to be able to explain why, given that working class people are active social agents, they seem to 'accept their unequal fates' (Willis 1977, p.120).

¹⁰ See Kaplan and Kelly (1994) for the argument that the work of the Birmingham School entailed a *misunderstanding* of the Gramscian notion of hegemony.

Cultural reproduction theory was proposed as a means of providing such an explanation. It holds that the cultural practices of the working classes are likely to be directed towards opposing dominant – middle class – culture, and that these result in ‘entrapping decisions in a sufficient number to grittingly meet the requirements of [capitalist] “structure” and so help to reproduce it’ (Willis 1977, p.128). Thus, according to cultural reproduction theory, by *challenging* domination through producing oppositional cultures, working class people find themselves *confirming* the very inequality that subordinates them: ‘The very strength and success of this cultural production brings some profoundly reproductive consequences’ (Willis 1977, p.130).

In Willis’ ethnographic study he demonstrates how, through the encounter with dominant culture and authority at school, a group of working class boys develop a counter-school culture wherein they engage in practices that ultimately serve to reduce their chances of doing anything other than ‘meaningless’ (industrial) work. Given that the counter-culture is something the boys actively engage in, for Willis ‘there is an element of self-damnation in the taking on of subordinate roles in Western capitalism’ (1997, p.3). For the purposes of this thesis it is important to note that what cultural reproduction theory provided was, at the very least, and amongst other things, a means of exploring some of the unintended and contradictory outcomes of working class youth cultural practice.

Willis’ work, and that of the Birmingham School in general, has been the object of considerable critique; for example, it is claimed that it privileges class analysis over consideration of other forms of inequality such as those related to differences in ethnicity and gender, that it constructs a misleading picture of young people’s (sub)cultures as coherent, homogenous, bounded wholes and that it portrays young people as necessarily resistant (Amit-Talai 1995; Wulff 1995; Miles 2000; Griffin 2001; Bucholtz 2002). The new anthropology of youth claims to distance itself from the association of youth culture with resistance (as well as with deviance), aiming to deal instead with ‘the entirety of youth cultural practice’ (Bucholtz 2002) in a myriad of contexts and in particular with the multiple ways in which young people, as

cultural practitioners, negotiate 'local' and 'global' spheres. In this, I would argue, it has also – regrettably – distanced itself from those analytical tools developed within the Birmingham school that encourage us to think about the *outcomes* of cultural practice, or agency. This is discussed more fully in the following section.

The new anthropology of youth

The new anthropology of youth can be understood as a growing collection of studies that have at their core the analysis of young people's creative cultural practices in diverse locations across the globe such as Iran, Australia, Indonesia, Senegal, Amsterdam, Nepal and England to name but a few. The shifting landscapes in which these small-scale studies are located are marked by large-scale social, economic and political transformations occurring to greater or lesser degrees of rapidity and profundity. A central concern in the studies is to evidence young people's active negotiations of the complex cultural terrain to which these transformations give rise. Whilst some of the studies in this literature deal with relatively wealthy youth (for example, Holden's 2006 study of 'adolechnics' in Japan), the majority explore the cultural practices of young people marginalised in some way or another – in particular on the basis of socio-economic status or ethnicity, and usually a combination of both.

Although it is claimed that the new anthropology of youth deals with the 'entirety of youth cultural practice' (Bucholtz 2002, p.525), a lingering focus on highly visible youth is discernible – a throwback to earlier Birmingham and Chicago school studies and their tendency to emphasise spectacular, or particularly dramatic groups. This can be seen for example in Shahabi's (2006) study of subversive youth subcultures in Iran, in Munoz and Marin's (2006) study of punk and hip-hop youth cultures in Columbia, in Feixa's (2006) study of punks in Catalonia and Mexico, in Niang's (2006) study of 'bboys' in Senegal, in Petrova's (2006) study of skinheads in France, in Sansone's (1995) study of Creoles in Amsterdam, and in Jourdan's (1995) study of young men known as 'Masta Liu' in the Solomon Islands. Related to this, as will be discussed below, there is also a lingering focus on practices of resistance.

One of the key themes in the new anthropology of youth is young people's engagement with what is broadly referred to as 'globalisation', and here there is a wholesale negation which is sometimes more and sometimes less explicit, of the homogenisation (or Americanisation) thesis. Here scholars are at pains to show how young people are not passive recipients of global (American) cultural products, services, styles and meanings but are actively involved in selecting, manipulating and reconfiguring them, if not rejecting them altogether. This position is particularly pronounced in, for example, Butcher and Thomas's (2006) study of young people from migrant backgrounds in western Sydney, in Nilan's (2006) study of devout Muslim youth in Indonesia, in Feixa's (2006) study of punks in Catalonia and Mexico, in Niang's (2006) study of hip-hop culture in Dakar and in Shahabi's (2006) study of youth subcultures in Tehran. This position is accompanied by the argument that the notion of *a* global youth culture should be replaced by concepts such as 'cultural bricolage' (for example, Shahabi 2006) or 'multi'-culturalism' (Amit-Talai 1995). In this sense the literature emphasises the local meanings that young people give to collective cultural preferences and practices. Nilan and Feixa (2006) argue that whilst young people across the globe – at least those living in the world's megacities – are part of a network society, and as such derive inspiration and information from global sources, they engage reflexively and in multiple ways with youth-oriented products, 'choosing or rejecting, transforming or synthesising' them (p.8).

A second key theme in the new anthropology of youth is that of identity, and in particular young people's active constructions of identity through cultural practices, notably but not exclusively along ethnic lines. A particularly strong theme here is that of hybridity, with emphasis on celebrating young people's creative combining of available subject positions or identities into new hybrid forms. So, for example, in Dallaire's (2006) study of Francophone youth in Canada we learn of young people's integration of Francophone and Anglophone cultural and linguistic practices into viable social identities. In Petrova's (2006) study of contemporary skinheads in France we learn how they 'represent intensely hybrid identity formations' (p.201)

through their simultaneous adoption of historic, national, regional and local affiliations. In Jourdan's study we learn of the ways in which unemployed young men known locally as 'Masta Liu' are creatively responding to their marginalisation through negotiating their urban identity:

[Masta Liu] may have been pushed to the fringes of urban economic life, but the responses they give to marginalization stress cultural agency as a means to find one's urban identity and social space. This renegotiation of identity takes place through a process of socio-cultural creolization, analogous in some ways to the processes at work in the pidginization and creolization of languages: an ongoing dialogue of cultural forms which is facilitated by the agency of individuals and which allows new meanings to be generated.

(Jourdan 2006, p.203)

A third key theme in the new anthropology of youth is that of consumption, or consumerism. For the majority of studies discussed above, this is more of a background, if ever-present, issue, implied for example in studies of young people's sartorial and music-related practices. In Nilan's (2006) study of devout Muslim youth in Indonesia, consumption is an explicit topic of discussion and here one of the central undertakings is to reconceptualise what has hitherto been portrayed as a process in which young people are passive, and to understand them as exercising agency through their practices of consumption. In this way young people are re-cast as not only purchasing the products aimed at them by the youth culture industry, but actively selecting and applying meaning to, or even rejecting, them altogether:

Giroux (1997) argues that cultural industry marketing articulates a 'cultural pedagogy' that invites young people to think, desire and behave in ways which favour display, consumption and unsatisfied yearnings... Nevertheless, we need to account for this in ways that do not connote youthful consumers as merely passive.

(Nilan 2006, p.93)

Agency

At the heart of the new anthropology of youth, and as indicated in the preceding discussion, is the issue of young people's cultural *agency*. Indeed, the issue of agency can be seen to cross-cut, or underpin each of the key themes identified above. In discussions of globalisation, scholars emphasise young people's active appropriation of the products, styles and services of the global youth culture industry; in discussions of identity authors emphasise young people's active construction of (hybrid) identities; and in those studies that focus on consumer practices they emphasise young people's active 'ordering of the landscape of consumption' (Nilan 2006, p.101). The kind of verbs used throughout this literature indicate a strong impetus to give credence to young people's cultural agency; here, young people create, constitute, generate, assert, define, invent, select, choose, construct, order, produce, make, synthesise, resist, pursue, shape, manipulate, redefine, negotiate, renegotiate, appropriate and re-appropriate.

This emphasis on agency is a welcome change from earlier anthropological research which framed youth as passive recipients of enculturation. Further, the studies discussed here are illuminating in what they reveal about the detail and diversity of young people's cultural practices around the world. However, they are on the whole united by an attempt to provide evidence for and celebrate young people's exercise of cultural agency, and there is as yet relatively little in the way of critical analyses of its *outcomes*. In particular there is a relative inattention to the *unintended* outcomes of youth cultural agency and how these are produced by structures.

There are a few exceptions to this, although the extent to which scholars explore these unintended outcomes varies. In Niang's (2006) study of 'bboys' in Dakar, we learn of the way in which a minority of them are committed to social and cultural transformation through their involvement with local hip-hop culture, which they see as a resistant and challenging force. Yet we also learn how the very act of aligning themselves with this cultural form alienates the masses, whose support the 'bboys' would need in order to bring about change, as the masses perceive hip-hop as an

American fashion that is being slavishly followed in their country. In Sansone's (1995) study of young men of Surinamese origin in Amsterdam, we learn of the way in which these young Creoles actively manipulate traditions and create new styles in the leisure-time arena and how they enjoy a certain status through this, yet how by doing so they effectively exclude themselves from the spheres of education and work. In Liechty's (1995) study of middle class youth in Kathmandu, we learn of the way in which the young middle classes claim local power through the cultural discourse of modernity, yet how doing so entails placing themselves in a position of marginality with regards to more distant power centres such as America:

As Kathmandu's middle class situates itself in the global political economy at the terminus of the 'development aid' pipeline it simultaneously secures itself a local position of class dominance (based on its control of local resources), *and* locks itself into a position of dependence and marginality *vis-a-vis* an external cultural metropole. Herein lies the irony of 'affluence' in the 'developing world'... The new middle class builds itself a position of *local* power by entering into the ultimately dependent discourses of state-modernism (progress and development) and commercial modernity.

(Leichty 1995, p.193, italics in original)

This acknowledgement of the unintended, and ironic, outcomes of youth cultural practice can also be found in two further studies, both of which are better understood within other bodies of literature (urban ethnography and subaltern resistance studies), but both of which deal directly with youth cultural practice and have provided useful tools for the analytical interpretation of data gathered for this research. The first of these is Bourgois' study of street culture amongst young men of Puerto-Rican descent living east Harlem, New York. Bourgois writes in part against structural explanations for poverty, within which the poor are reduced to the status of passive props of an inequitable class system, and in part against the culture of poverty thesis and the way in which this (in its most widely understood form) explains the persistence of urban poverty with reference to the 'intergenerational transmission of

destructive values and behaviours among individuals within families’ (Bourgois 1995, p.16). The culture of poverty thesis was first introduced by Oscar Lewis, his most expansive account of it residing in his publication *La Vida* (1968), although even in this work his explanation of the theory is limited to a relatively few number of pages (Perlman 1976). The thesis holds that some people living in urban poverty remain poor because (through intrafamilial, intergenerational socialisation) they develop certain behavioural and attitudinal traits – a certain culture – which both allows them to cope with deprivation and perpetuates it. Whilst the culture of poverty thesis was a reaction *against* the prevailing attitude that poor people are poor by their own making, it has been widely interpreted as a theory that holds the poor accountable for ‘their’ poverty (Harvey and Reed 1996)¹¹. Within this interpretation the urban poor are understood negatively and pathologically, their passivity and fatalism claimed as the ultimate causes of their predicament rather than as symptoms.

Writing in significant part against the culture of poverty thesis, Bourgois imports cultural reproduction theory (developed within the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies, as discussed above) to the study of street culture in a context of urban poverty. According to him, it is through participants’ active production of an oppositional street culture, the realm most readily available to them for exercising agency and gaining respect, that they unwittingly reproduce the very domination they oppose and inflict suffering on themselves, their families and communities:

street culture’s resistance to social marginalisation is the contradictory key to its destructive impetus. Through cultural practices of opposition, individuals shape the oppression that larger forces impose on them... the urban poor devise [a range of strategies] to escape or circumvent the structures of

¹¹ This widespread interpretation is ironic given that the concept of culture was originally espoused in the social sciences as a means of getting away from reliance on biologically deterministic explanations of social phenomena (Perlman 1976), and given Lewis’ own acknowledgement that the ultimate causes of poverty are to be found in capitalism’s destructive dialectic and not in the inherent character of poor people.

segregation and marginalisation that entrap them, including... strategies that [result] in self-inflicted suffering.

(Bourgois 1995, pp.17-18)

Here, the unintended – and contradictory – outcomes of cultural agency, in particular as exercised by those in positions of socio-economic marginalisation, are at the forefront of analysis, as we learn of the ways in which young men's attempts to gain respect, by engaging in street culture, leads them into a life of drugs, crime and violence, and impinges on the lives of their female peers, their families and their communities with devastating effects.

The second piece of research which points to the unintended outcomes of youth cultural practice is Abu-Lughod's (1990) study of Bedouin women in Egypt. It is worth noting that Abu-Lughod focuses on the issue of resistance and, drawing on Foucault, uses practices of resistance as a diagnostic of power, exploring them in order to understand how power operates. As part of her ethnography Abu-Lughod examines the contemporary cultural practices of young women from Bedouin communities, in particular the new phenomenon of purchasing and wearing consumer commodities such as lingerie, moisturising creams, lipstick and nail polish. She notes how, through these cultural practices (in this case of resistance against elders), young women inadvertently enmesh themselves in new systems of power, specifically in individualised, sexualised forms of femininity in the context of Egypt's increasing integration into the global economy. Abu-Lughod's study thereby points to (among many other things) the unintended outcomes of contemporary cultural practice; to the way in which young women perpetually move into 'fields of overlapping and intersecting forms of subjection' (1990, p.52) through their commodity consumption.

Within the two studies described above, and in the new anthropology of youth, there is a tendency when writing about counter-productive outcomes of youth cultural

practice to focus on practices of resistance and their unintended outcomes. Bourgois' young men, Abu-Lughod's young women and Niang's 'bboys' are all resisting a dominant culture and their marginalisation within it. However, as the data chapters in this thesis will go on to show, it is also through *participating in* dominant cultural norms that marginalised youth can stymie their own dreams of a better life.

This thesis locates itself alongside the minority of studies which deal explicitly with the unintended outcomes of youth cultural practice, and more broadly of agency, offering insights into the various ways in which young people in positions of socio-economic marginalisation come, through their cultural and other practices, to undermine their own attempts to fulfil their dreams. Importantly though, it differentiates itself from these studies; by pointing to practices and their unintended outcomes in a new context, by pointing to the ironic and counter-productive outcomes of *participating in* rather than resisting dominant cultures, and by offering a new metaphor for understanding the processes at work.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the three bodies of literature to which this thesis makes a contribution. It began with a discussion of studies concerning *youth in Thailand*, and noted the way in which these are largely characterised by an emphasis on the interrelated notions of risk, destruction, sex and drugs, by the exploration of pre-defined topics through the use of quantitative methodologies, and by an insufficient degree of attention to young people's socio-economic positioning and related location within particular social, cultural and moral frameworks. This thesis offers an alternative understanding of *youth in Thailand*, by discussing ethnographic research into the everyday lives of young people living in a Bangkok slum, which reveals not risk and destruction but dreams of a better life and a strong impetus to fulfil them, and through this something of the complex negotiations of the economic, social cultural and moral realms.

The chapter then went on to discuss the emerging *youth and development* discourse in the Thai and international spheres, noting the widespread construction of youth as productive resource and development as the creation of productive labour, and how these function to confine sanctioned aspirations to the realm of productive activity. It also pointed to the pervasive notion that development is ‘up to you(th)’; that as long as young people make the ‘right’ choices and act accordingly then they can ensure positive developmental outcomes. This thesis also offers an alternative reading of youth and development; first (in chapter four) it notes the centrality of commodity consumption in young people’s aspirations, and second (in chapter six) it points to the way in which thinking and acting in accordance with the notion that ‘it’s up to you(th)’ has unintended consequences, which result in the reproduction, rather than challenge, of the relations that produce marginalisation and inequality.

Lastly, this chapter discussed the *new anthropology of youth*, offering an overview of its intellectual roots and a brief outline of the key themes dealt with therein. Discussion here noted that one of the central features of this body of literature is a conceptualisation of young people as cultural agents and an exploration of the exercise of that agency. It also noted that there is a tendency to pay relatively little attention to the outcomes of young people’s cultural agency and the structures with which they interact. This thesis contributes to this literature by making the exploration of such outcomes – in particular unintended ones – a central concern and by addressing young slum dwellers’ interaction with certain structures.

The following chapter reports on the methodology used in this research, and includes an elaboration of the discussion concerning the selection of literatures dealt with here.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a personal account of the processes of research design, fieldwork and analysis. It is divided into three main sections. The first deals with the overall research methodology and includes sections on the methodological approach and epistemological orientation, and research topic. The second section deals with the process of fieldwork and entails discussion of research sites, access and entry, participants, relationships and identity, data collection methods, interpretation and ethics. The third section discusses the processes of analysis and interpretation.

PART I: RESEARCH DESIGN

METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL STATUS OF THE DATA

This study is ethnographic and through fieldwork I seek to gain an understanding of the meanings that participants attach to their experiences and to locate these within broader cultural and socio-economic processes. For some, and especially for ethnographers working in the first half of the twentieth century, an ethnographic approach was aligned with a positivist, empiricist epistemology and an objectivist ontology. From this perspective social reality is comprised of objective facts discovered by the ethnographer and presented in the ethnographic text. According to this view there is no distinction between the social and the natural worlds as objects of knowledge, and the task of social research is to gather, analyse and present findings obtained through the researchers' sense perceptions (Bryman 2008). For others, ethnography is aligned with an interpretivist epistemology and a subjectivist ontology (see Grimshaw and Hart 1995; LeCompte and Schensul 1999a). From this perspective the social world is continuously emerging and constantly being

interpreted and reinterpreted by its inhabitants, including research participants, ethnographers and readers. Interpretivist research seeks to understand how individuals make sense of the world around them and what meanings they attach to their experiences, and to understand things – as far as possible – from research participants' points of view. According to this approach, the task of social research is to reflect people's interpretations of social experiences. This study combines these two approaches; it seeks to understand participants' experiences and interpretations of them, and to situate these within what I take to be an objective, if shifting, socio-economic and cultural reality.

RESEARCH TOPIC

Once I had decided that this study would be based in Bangkok, the overarching goal was to explore the everyday lives of young people living in poverty and those from wealthy backgrounds, as well as the experiences of those caring for them. This remit was extremely wide-ranging as I felt it was important to be open and responsive to issues as they emerged in the field, but once fieldwork was under way the goal was gradually refined, a 'funnelling' process central to the ethnographic approach (Agar 1980, in Sanjek 1996). This led to a focus on the following areas of young people's everyday lives: how they spend their time, their key relationships, their use of money and material objects, their difficulties and sources of happiness and sadness, and their thoughts about and dreams for their futures. The focus with carers was on the care of young people, on their lives as young people in the past and their views of key changes and continuities in experiences of youth. This focus was chosen in light of preliminary conversations conducted with participants and the repetitions and absences they yielded. For example, in early conversations with carers there was a mixture of disdain for and puzzlement over how young people spend their time and concern over how much money young people use and what they spend it on. In early conversations with young people there was a silence around certain aspects of their relationships with parents and carers and repetitions of the importance of fulfilling filial obligations. It was the repetitions and absences such as these which caught my interest and led to the gradual focusing of the research into its more bounded topics. Whilst these were the topics which went on to guide data collection, it is important to

note that through them other topics and issues also came to the fore during data analysis. The narrowing-down process described here continued after fieldwork, leading in particular to my decision to place the young people in slum communities at the forefront of analysis and to draw on research with wealthy participants in a secondary and minor capacity. Hence most of the discussion in this chapter focuses on the urban poor element of the research, with relatively little discussion of wealthy component.

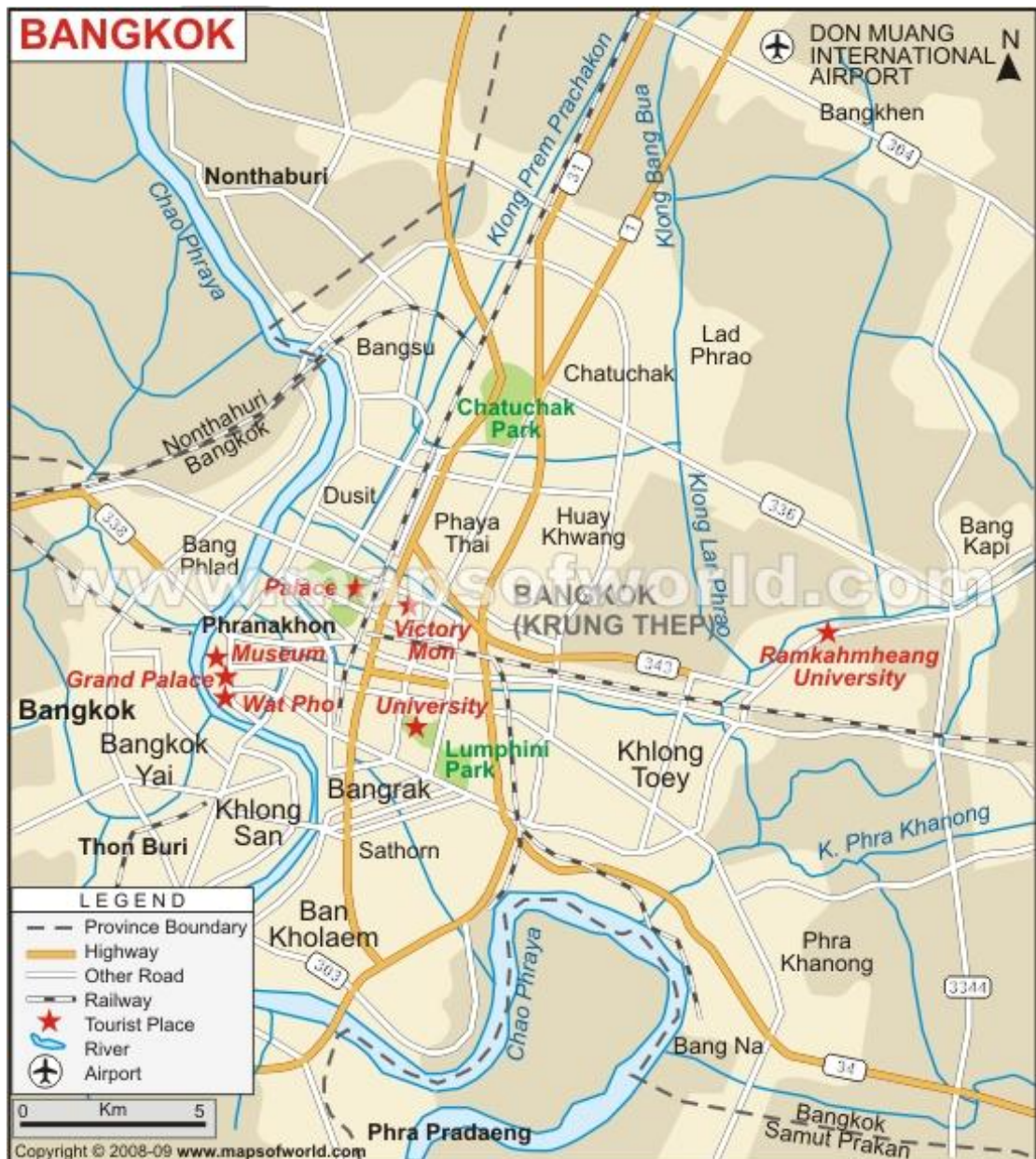


Figure 1. Map of Bangkok 2009, showing Khlong Toey district. (Source: Maps of World 2009)

PART II: INTO THE FIELD(s)

RESEARCH SITES

Urban poor sites

The research with young people and their families living in urban poverty took place in Khlong Toey slum¹², which has provided low-cost housing to many thousands of low-income people in Thailand for the past seventy years.



Photograph 1. A Khlong Toey slum community by the river, comprising houses and flats. Skyscrapers in Bangkok's financial district in the background. (Photo: Author)

¹² Khlong Toey slum is in the district of Khlong Toey, which is divided into three sub-districts and forty communities, twenty two of which are designated by the local government office as slum, or 'crowded' communities.

The following excerpt is taken from a field report I wrote a short while after beginning research there, whilst I was living with a wealthy family on the other side of the city. I offer it here, along with photographs, as a means of evoking a sense of everyday life, albeit at an initial, surface level.

It is Thursday morning and I am on my way to the slum. I get off the bus and the first thing I see is a man lying face down on the ground. He seems to be in his forties and the skin on his shins and feet resembles the texture of tree bark. One of his legs dangles over the curb and there is a pool of vomit next to his face. The sun is already beating hard and it is only 10 a.m. I wonder how long this man will lie here, what his fate will be. I look to the two women sitting at the bus stop and one of them shakes her head briskly; a warning? Not to touch him? Not to look at him? I side-step around his head and cross the road.



Photograph 2. Slum housing under the expressway, backing onto the river.
(Photo: Author)



Photograph 3. Slum housing backing onto the railway.
(Photo: Author)

Walking with my back to the river I cross a railway line, and looking to either side I see houses backing on to it and children sitting on the tracks playing. A group of motorcycle taxi drivers look up from a game of draughts and I smile

as I meet their gaze. They stare back and I struggle to read their expressions. I walk on and pass an old woman who is sitting in the doorway of a derelict shop. She rocks backwards and forwards muttering to herself and a long stream of brown liquid runs in the gutter under her bare feet. She picks something up from the ground and puts it in her mouth. The people at the food stall opposite avert their gazes. I walk on, past the community centre and past a food stall when I hear someone calling me: 'P Bua, P Bua'¹³ have you eaten yet?' It is Tam, he is eating a bowl of noodle soup and invites me to join him. Tam is twenty two years old and a recovering drug addict and now acts as a mentor for other young men who are trying to piece their lives back together having lost them for a while to the oblivion of substance abuse. Tam shows me his nails. They are each painted a different colour: 'are they beautiful?' he asks. 'A little bit' I tell him. He strokes his hair: 'do you like my hair, do I look good today?' he asks. 'A little bit' I reply. He places both hands on his tummy and asks if I think he is fat. 'A little bit' I say. He insists that he looks handsome today and laughs, but is stopped short by a woman and a boy who have begun shouting in the street.

The woman has a stick about a metre long and she starts whipping the boy with it about his torso. He tries to protest but this seems to enrage her further. I look to Tam and he stares into his bowl. The boy tries to run away and the woman grabs him by the sleeve, but now can't hit him properly with the stick because it's too long and she is too close to him. So she drops the stick and beats him about the head with her hands. The boy stops protesting and brings his arms to head to shield himself from the blows. The fear in his eyes before they disappear behind his hands stays with me for the rest of the day, and the next day, and the one after that. Tam gives me a lift to a local NGO on his motorbike and I spend the rest of the day looking through the literature there, for information on the history of Khlong Toey slum – Ganya, my translator in the slum, is studying all day so we aren't doing any interviews. I leave at around 5 p.m., but before this I pay a visit to P Jok at

¹³ Bua ('Lotus' in Thai) is the name I was given by the first Thai family I stayed with and was the name I was known by throughout fieldwork.

her food stall. She makes me a drink that is bright orange and so sweet that any flavour it might have had is undetectable, brings it over to the table and then hurries off to serve the customers who have started dropping by on their way home. I sit for half an hour and watch the world go by.



Photograph 4. Food stall in an upgraded slum community. (Photo: Author)



Photograph 5. Main road leading into an upgraded slum community (Photo: Author)

Mopeds carrying whole families chug past and children chase each other down the street laughing. A truck comes round the corner and about forty balaclavas bob up and down in the back. Construction workers I guess. A girl pulls up on a bike wearing a red spaghetti strap top; the English text printed across the front says ‘I might not be perfect but some parts are irresistible’. An old woman walks past wearing a pakoma¹⁴, her back is stooped and she is chewing maag¹⁵. A little boy approaches the food stall, picks up a hand-held electronic game that P Jok keeps by her chair and sits down opposite me to play. He looks up and I see that all of his teeth are black. I make my way to the bus stop and wait for about fifteen minutes. The noise from the traffic is deafening. The fumes are unbearable and I try and breathe as little as possible. A man swaggers barefoot through five lanes of speeding traffic, holding his palm up to the oncoming cars. Horns blare and brakes screech. A street cleaner sweeps the rubbish from the gutter by the bus stop into her dust

¹⁴ A traditional Thai sarong.

¹⁵ ‘Traditional Thai chewing gum’: a dark red substance made from betel leaves which is chewed and held in the mouth for long periods of time. It is common in rural areas, and in particular amongst older women.

pan and urges the young girl trailing behind her to keep up. The girl has difficulty walking because she is only wearing one shoe and is limping. I look at the river which runs under the two flyovers and parallel to the road I am on. It is black, stagnant and putrid; decades of pollution make it look like an oil slick. Mosquitoes dance on the surface of the water and they look like raindrops. On the opposite riverbank I see a dead dog and a pink plastic chair with three legs which sits upside down in the mud. Along the riverbank, and at points falling into the river, are the backs of people's houses. They are made of wooden slats and corrugated iron and are supported by crooked poles. I wonder what happens to the houses and the people in them when the rainy season comes and the river rises. A section of wood on one of the houses catches the light from the early evening sun and it turns to gold.



Photograph 6. Slum housing under the expressway, backing onto the river. (Photo: Author)

Settlement in what is now the central cluster of Khlong Toey slum communities began in the late 1930s, when around two hundred families were hired to build the port and its warehouses. Construction was suspended during the war years it regained

momentum afterwards, and from the late 1950s expanded rapidly as the Thai government's industrial development strategy was pursued with vigour. As industrial activity around the port increased, the need for large numbers of manual labourers grew. Combinations of urban poverty and low education provided a local workforce, and drought and crop failure pushed rural agricultural workers – especially from the north east of Thailand – away from their rice fields and towards Bangkok port to earn a living (Duang Prateep Foundation 2003).

Port workers built houses on a concentrated area of vacant swamp land close to the dockyards, and over time this grew into the largest concentration of poor people in the country. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the number of inhabitants continued to multiply as the port continued to provide work, as industry boomed and factories sought workers, as the nearby Sukhumvit area and its businesses, shops and entertainment facilities grew and provided unskilled jobs, and as housing remained cheap albeit insecure (*ibid.*).

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the early 1970s saw an escalation of evictions and relocation schemes for inhabitants of Khlong Toey slum communities, which pushed many families off the increasingly valuable land, out of the inner city and in many cases into suburban housing projects, away from social networks and viable sources of income. Many returned. Concomitantly, this period was marked by a growth in the political organisation of Khlong Toey slum inhabitants and by protests against forced removal, spearheaded by a woman who grew up in the slum and is founder-director of one of the major NGOs working there. Widespread media coverage of the situations faced by Khlong Toey slum dwellers was designed to galvanise public support for their plight (*ibid.*).

From the mid 1970s onwards the NGO presence in Khlong Toey slum continued to grow and this, combined with the government upgrading policy in 1977, meant that service provision and physical infrastructure in some areas improved: wooden walkways were replaced by concrete paths, running water and electricity were piped

into houses, a rubbish collection service was created, and the informal slum school established in the late 1960s was officially recognised by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority and became a state school providing education for numerous slum children. Still, rural migrants and the urban poor spilled into the slums from the countryside and neighbouring areas, natural population growth added to the population density, and it swelled beyond capacity. Existing settlements spread and new communities sprang up within the district as the gradually improving infrastructure struggled to cope with the demands of those who were benefitting least from Bangkok's socio-economic transformation (ibid.).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s new social problems emerged and intensified and contributed to earning Khlong Toey slum its reputation as one of the most dangerous places in the city. Drug use, gang warfare, gambling and violence became integral features in the tapestry of slum life and popular representations of it. HIV-AIDS became a major issue with which NGOs were forced to contend. The institutionalisation of children and young people into orphanages in the slum increased as individuals and families struggled to cope with the strains of urban poverty and the disappearance of available childcare (especially in the form of kin networks), and as NGOs provided growing numbers of spaces for them. Meanwhile, old social problems persisted. Lack of money, illegal tenure, forced eviction and house fires continued, and continue to this day, to form the backdrop of insecurity against which slum dwellers live their lives (Duang Prateep Foundation 1995).

The twenty two slum communities in Khlong Toey district are located between Sukhumvit Road to the north, which houses some of Bangkok's main business, shopping and entertainment spots and the Chao Praya river to the south which houses Bangkok's first port. Several of the communities border each other and form a central cluster. Here, where one community begins and another ends is not always obvious even to long-standing residents. Other slum communities are isolated from each other and from this central hub. Cutting through the middle of Khlong Toey district are a railway line, two elevated express ways and a main trunk road leading away from the port. Traffic and pollution problems are severe.

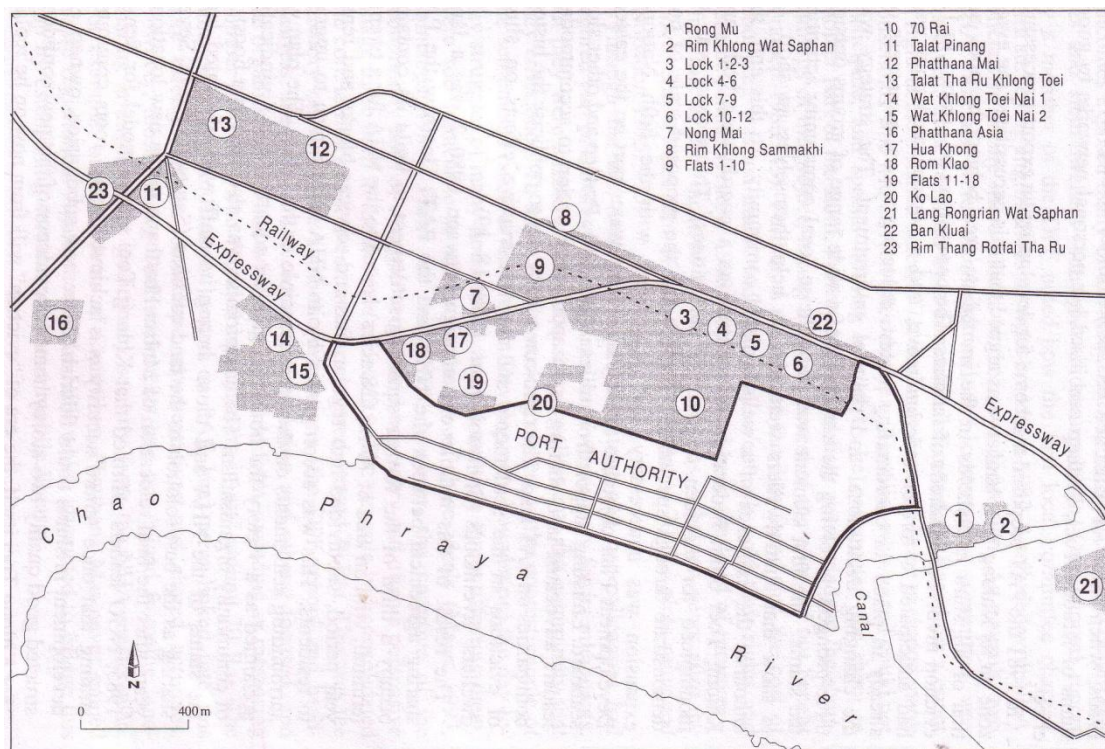


Figure 2. Map of Khlong Toey slum settlements. (Source: Askew 2002)

According to the Khlong Toey District Office (2005) there are around 17,322 houses throughout Khlong Toey's twenty two slum communities, although it remains unclear how 'house' has been defined. Estimates of the total slum population range from around 84,000 (Khlong Toey District Office 2005) to 135,000 (Duang Prateep Foundation 2003). Three of the slum communities – those at the central hub where NGO presence and activity is strongest – are on land owned by the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT), which was leased to the National Housing Authority and is rented, via landlords by residents. This lease agreement ran out in 2005 and inhabitant's tenure status on the land was uncertain and under negotiation at the time of fieldwork. One slum community is situated on land owned by a private company and inhabitants rent the land legally. One slum community is on land owned by a private company and residents' tenure is illegal. Residents in all remaining slum communities are officially classified as illegal squatters on land owned mostly by the PAT (Khlong Toey District Office 2005). This research took place with inhabitants from six of Khlong Toey's slum communities, at varying degrees of isolation from the central hub.

One of the major implications of conducting this research in Khlong Toey relates to the number of NGOs working there and to its high profile within Thai urban development activism. Khlong Toey is heralded by many as a unique success story in terms of in situ, infrastructural upgrading, in terms of securing residents' tenure rights and in terms of urban community mobilisation, and over the past thirty years particular community members have been at the forefront of the national struggle to place slum dwellers' needs on the government agenda. This means that there is a potential bias in this research towards people with an unusually high level of access to opportunities and services, and participants are arguably more disposed to, or familiar with, the notion of development. However, the processes of mobilisation and upgrading have not been limited to Khlong Toey slum nor to Bangkok city, rather they exist on a national scale. Further, neither slums nor the communities which comprise them should be seen as homogenous units. Areas of more extreme deprivation exist alongside relatively upgraded areas, and poverty and social problems such as drug abuse, alcoholism and violence can be found throughout.

Wealthy sites

The research with young people from wealthy backgrounds took place at three main sites: at the home of a wealthy Thai family in a suburb in the north of Bangkok where I lived for three months and at two government schools in the centre of the city, both with very good reputations and known to be attended largely by those from wealthy families. One of these is a girls' school and the other is a boys' school, and both enjoy royal patronage. Whilst the vast majority of research with the young people took place on school premises, research with their adult carers took place in a variety of settings throughout the city; at their places of work or restaurants nearby, at education centres where their children attended extra classes, in shopping malls and in their homes. The following excerpt is taken from a fieldwork report written when I was living with my host family in northern Bangkok:

It is Tuesday morning, just before 5 a.m. and Mae Yai, the grandmother and matriarch of the house is calling me. I drag myself out of bed and into the garden which is steeped in the scent of fresh jasmine and the grey stillness of dawn. Mae Yai is wearing a long white dress and is standing under the mango tree, rotating her arms slowly in opposite directions. As I approach, her grin becomes so wide that her eyes disappear and she chuckles into her chest; at last the farang¹⁶ is up and can share in the success of Mae Yai's method for achieving true happiness. She signals for me to follow her movements and for the next half hour we bend and stretch together, in preparation for the serious business of meditation that is to come. We walk slowly, barefoot, across the different shaped stones that have been laid in a wide circle and we rock back and forth on the old, worn coconut shells that are set into the soil, both designed to invigorate the pressure points on our feet. Mae Yai leads me to a low bamboo table and again indicates that I am to copy her. I close my eyes, inhale slowly through my nose and breathe out through my mouth. We sit like this for about thirty minutes, until a cock crows next door, the music from a distant radio floats over the garden wall and pots and pans begin to clatter.



Photograph 7. Mae Yai (Photo: Author)



Photograph 8. The soi¹⁷ where my wealthy host family lived (Photo: Author)

It is approaching 6 a.m. and Mae Yai shoos me into the house to get washed and dressed. Shortly after the monk has been to collect his alms, P Wunchai (the father of the house) climbs into the air-conditioned minivan and starts

¹⁶ Thai for white Westerner

¹⁷ Thai for lane

the engine and I, P Goi (the mother of the house), Nam (the sixteen year old daughter) and Mai (the thirteen year old son) follow. Mai turns on the minivan TV and the advertising jingles provide the soundtrack to our journey into the city. They drop me at a sky train station where I meet Am, my interpreter for the wealthy people in the research, and together we make our way to P Gwad's house, the mother in a wealthy family who has agreed to be interviewed. We take a twenty minute journey through the city's central business and shopping districts where the spotless, air-conditioned train weaves its way in and out of the skyscrapers and multi-story shopping malls that have earned Bangkok its reputation as one of the shopping capitals of the world. When we get off the train we are greeted by several large LCD screens that are suspended from the ceiling of the station, which tell us that our lives are not complete without the Nescafe Red Cup, Dove whitening underarm deodorant and Pond's whitening face cream.



Photograph 9. Waiting for the sky train.
(Photo: Author)



Photograph 10. Sky train weaving through the skyscrapers (Photo: Author)

We walk past Starbucks where a handful of people sit sipping their caramel mochaccinos, and to a taxi stand where Am hails a taxi which takes us to P Gwad's neighbourhood. We arrive for the interview early so Am asks the driver to drop us at the front of the soi and we make our way on foot to P Gwad's house; it wouldn't do to turn up before our appointed time, I am told. The soi twists and turns and I follow Am as she zig-zags across the road in order to walk in the shade of the high walls that shield the houses from view.

An aeroplane soars overhead and its brilliant white trail slices through the still, cloudless sky. We arrive at P Gwad's house and ring the bell; the metal gates open automatically revealing three large, shiny cars parked under an ornate wooden canopy.



Photograph 11. House of a wealthy Thai family. (Photo: Author)

The gates close behind us and P Gwad comes out sporting an L.A. Gear tracksuit and a pair of Channel sunglasses perched on top of her head. Am and P Gwad used to work for the same company and haven't seen each other for a long time, so the first twenty minutes of our meeting are spent sitting on the leather sofa in the air-conditioned living room sipping iced lime juice brought to us by the housemaid, whilst they exchange gifts and pleasantries and news of old colleagues. We slip seamlessly into the interview, in which P Gwad talks about her childhood and youth in Bangkok with her parents and sister, about her experiences at university, about the time she spent in America in her early twenties, about meeting her husband – now a successful businessman who owns a chain of holiday resorts on the coast – and about her experiences of parenting. Soon her son and husband emerge from the computer room and join us, and P Gwad sends the maid off to Tesco to buy lunch for us all and we wile away the next couple of hours exchanging more pleasantries until Am determines that it's time to leave. On our way down the

soi I notice that some of the walls have broken glass set into the concrete, others have barbed wire that has been wound into coils and cemented on top, and the rest have sharp metal spikes that point to the sky and to the call for protection that accompanies the material wealth they contain.

ACCESS AND ENTRY

The problem of obtaining access to the data one needs looms large in ethnography. It is often at its most acute in initial negotiations to enter a setting and during the ‘first days in the field’; but the problem persists, to one degree or another, throughout the data collection process... the discovery of obstacles to access, and perhaps of effective means of overcoming them, itself provides insights into the social organization of the setting.

(Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, p.54)

Khlong Toey slum communities

The task of gaining access to the slum research site and participants began at home in mid 2005, on the internet, where I searched for information using the terms ‘urban poor’ and ‘Bangkok’, and learned about Khlong Toey slum and about an NGO operating there. I contacted a member of its staff by e-mail to introduce myself, explain that I was hoping to do research there and ask if they would be willing to assist me. They advised me to visit when I arrived and when I left for Bangkok in November 2005 I did. After an interview with a member of the board of directors I was given permission to conduct my study there and introduced to a resident interpreter, Ganya. As well as introducing me to Ganya, the NGO organised an initial research session with a group of eight young people. Participants in this session were noticeably uncomfortable and I later discovered that they had been told they were attending a training course and were given no choice concerning their attendance.

When I voiced my concern to the staff member who had organised the session she insisted that: ‘We get them sponsorship, they have to do what we say’.

As well as indicating something of the (legitimised) power relations between young people and their patrons, the session was useful in demonstrating that access to participants might be better gained through naturally-occurring or explicitly requested activities. To this end I began attending a community gym, at the invitation of the community police officer who set it up, which took place every day from 5-8 p.m. in the front yard of the NGO. I also set up two weekly voluntary English clubs at the request of several young people, one in the playground of a community school on weekday evenings and another in a library train on Saturday mornings. As well as allowing me access to potential participants these English clubs went some way towards legitimising my presence in the slum; to be there without having a respected role would have been difficult, and it was through the clubs rather than through the research that I was seen to be doing something of value (although this in itself proved to be contentious, as older generations demanded to know why young people were getting all the help and they were being ‘left behind’).

At the gym and the English clubs I encountered numerous gatekeepers: the gym instructor, a school teacher and director, community leaders, Ganya and the young people themselves. There are two points to note here. First, whilst gatekeepers facilitated access to participants, in some cases I spent a considerable amount of effort subsequently distancing myself from them in order to be accepted by potential participants. For example, in the community where I set up the English club at the library train I had contacted the community leader to ask for her permission to set up the club. Initially she insisted that I reported to her when I arrived, announced my arrival on the loud speaker, referring to me with the formal and exalted title *ajaaan* (professor), came to the start of the sessions and insisted on taking a register. Initially my relationship with these young people was formal and uncomfortable, but became less so once I stopped reporting to the community leader and so was not announced, arrived on my own or with Ganya and stopped taking a register. The young people began to refer to me as *P* (older sibling) denoting a less formal relationship, albeit

indicative of seniority. Second, young participants themselves functioned as gatekeepers. Whilst my initial idea was to research with young people and carers within the same family this was only possible in nine cases; once a young person had disclosed issues that were sensitive, shameful or painful, often they did not want me to research with their carers and I honoured those wishes.



Photograph 12. The NGO forecourt.
(Photo: Author)



Photograph 13. On a trip to a ‘strongman’ competition with members of the community gym. (Photo: Ganya)



Photograph 14. At the library train English club. (Photo: Author)



Photograph 15. At the community school English club. (Photo: Author)

After a few months, and at the suggestion of a small group of young people to whom I had grown particularly close, I moved into the slum, which proved extremely valuable in gaining deeper access to participants' daily lives. I lived in a rented room in a shared house, located in an upgraded area on a busy road which accommodated several shipping businesses, mini-marts, food stalls, churches, open-air karaoke bars, motorcycle taxi stands and a large rubbish re-cycling centre. Behind the houses on this road was a shipping container yard, the docks and the Chao Praya river. The house had three storeys and stood in a terraced row of around twenty others, most of which had shops or food stalls on the ground floor, many of these doubling as living quarters for those working in them. There were around thirty people staying in the house at any one time, although it was difficult to keep track of who were residents and who were guests.



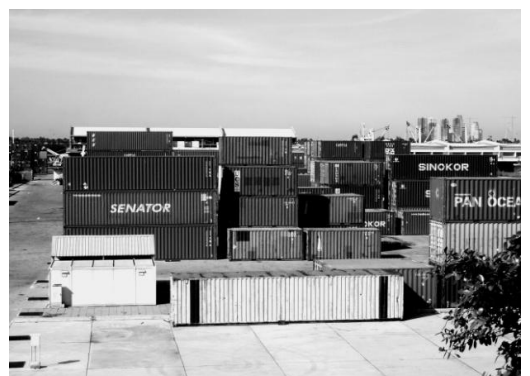
Photograph 16. The house (in an upgraded slum community) in which I rented a room. (Photo: Author)



Photograph 17. Inside the shared entrance hall of my house. (Photo: Author)



Photograph 18. My room from the landing (Photo: Author)



Photograph 19. View from my window of the shipping container yard at Bangkok port. (Photo: Author)

Every night at around 1 a.m. I fell asleep to the groaning of metal cranes, and the floor trembled as shipping containers were unloaded onto the ground. On one side of the room, separated by a concrete wall with large chunks missing was the bathroom, which I shared with around twelve other people. Every morning at 4 a.m. I woke up to the sound of one of my neighbours coughing and vomiting into the toilet as he prepared himself for his shift in the fish canning factory where he worked. He told me that he had been ill for over a month but needed to keep working to earn money to pay the rent for the room where he lived with his wife and their two children, to buy food for them and to pay for school uniforms and books. Next to the bathroom was a room housing a group of four young men and always several friends who worked as casual labourers at the port, and on the other side of my room lived Ide, a young woman from upcountry who had recently moved to the slum and was addicted to methamphetamines, although she was in the process of trying to quit as I left.

Moving into a slum community marked an important shift from being a complete outsider to gaining some of the credentials associated with being a neighbour, in particular experiencing daily life in what was a quite demanding physical environment. Although I would never be a true insider – my stay was always temporary, for the purpose of research, and the option of leaving was always open to me – simply being there, day in day out, night after night, seemed to engender a certain trust and openness in participants, as well as allowing me access to events to which I was not party before. Amongst the wealthy participants who were aware of my move to Khlong Toey slum, a certain curiosity was evident, and my residence there proved to be a useful means of gaining an understanding of their perceptions of slum dwellers.

Wealthy families

The task of gaining access to the wealthy sites also began at home on the internet, where I searched for a home stay in Bangkok and made contact with a wealthy family in a northern suburb with two teenage children. They agreed to let me stay with them for three months from November 2005, and shortly after my arrival the mother of the family introduced me to an ex-colleague of hers, Am, who became my interpreter for the wealthy element of the research. Through Am I contacted staff members at the two schools attended by my host family's children, and was given permission by the staff to research with young people at these schools.



Photograph 20. The garden of my wealthy host family's house, with the doors to the house in the background.
(Photo: Author)



Photograph 21. The living room in my host family's house.
(Photo: Author)

SAMPLES

There were four core samples in this research: two comprising poor people (one of which consisted of twenty eight young people and one of twenty seven adult carers) and two comprising wealthy people (one of which consisted of twenty six young people and one of thirty one adult carers). 'Core sample' refers here to people who were interviewed. Some of those in the core samples also participated in focus group discussions and participant observation.

Khlong Toey slum participants

In Khlong Toey slum the participants in both samples were diverse, in terms of age, relative levels of poverty, family background, education level, work experience, occupation, and for young people in terms of who cared for them. The tables below provide a summary of some of the basic information pertaining to young participants and adult carers in the slum, accurate at the time of data collection:

Table 1. Basic, general information about young slum participants.

Age range	13 – 22 years
Gender	14 young women, 14 young men
Types of education	Regular government school, vocational training school, community college, NGO classes, university.
Education levels	Incomplete primary schooling, completed primary schooling, incomplete lower secondary schooling, completed upper secondary schooling, tertiary education
Types of work	Cleaning, rubbish collection, stationary street vending, mobile street vending, market stall vending, product preparation for vendors, waitressing, teaching English, computer game programming, labouring at the port, labouring at the market, labouring at cafes/ restaurants.
Money from carers	50 – 250 baht per week ¹⁸
Types of housing	Wooden houses, wooden and concrete houses, concrete flats, mixed-material huts (wood, MDF, corrugated iron, tarpaulin)
Types of household compositions	Both parents (with and without siblings), extended families (with and without siblings/ cousins), single parents (with and without siblings), single non-parent, family carers (with and without siblings), non-family carers, older siblings, partner and son.

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

¹⁸ At the time of writing there are 68.5 baht to the pound.

Table 2. Basic, general information about adult slum participants.

Types of carer	Mothers, Grandmothers, Fathers, Aunts, Great Grandmother
Education levels	No schooling, incomplete primary schooling, completed primary schooling, Diploma, Bachelor's degree
Types of work	Stationary street vending, mobile street vending, market stall vending, laundry, shoe-mending, day labouring at the port, cleaning, waitressing, taxi driving, day labouring at the market, rubbish recycling, factory work, construction work, NGO administration.
Household incomes	875 – 4,000 baht per week
Household savings	4 households with savings 5,000 – 12,000 baht
Household debts	19 households with debts (to local, informal money lenders) 2,000 – 90,000 baht

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

Researching with young people in the selected age bracket was a matter of expediency; those between thirteen and twenty two were the ones to whom I had best initial access, with whom rapport was most easily built and the ones with whom data collection was most feasible in terms of managing the more formal research sessions. Whilst I had initially planned and envisaged conducting research with younger children, it proved more viable to study older young people. Only nine of the young people were connected to those in the adult carer sample. This was a matter of necessity; as mentioned earlier, in some cases (where young people had recounted experiences that highlighted tensions between themselves and their carers) they did not want me to interview them, in other cases carers of young participants were too busy or did not want to take part in the research and in yet further cases (with older participants) young people could not identify anybody who they considered to be main carers. Where research took place with carers first, in the majority of cases the young people who had been discussed did not want to take part, possibly because of feeling that they had been portrayed in a certain way and that it would be inappropriate to dispute or challenge that.

Wealthy participants

As noted above, the research with wealthy participants comprised two core samples of twenty six young people and thirty one adult carers. Twenty one young people were connected to the adult carer sample. The tables below provide a snap shot of some of the basic, general information pertaining to wealthy participants:

Table 3. Basic, general information about young wealthy participants

Age range	13 – 17 years
Gender	13 young women, 13 young men
Types of education	Government school, extra classes
Education levels	Enrolled in lower secondary, enrolled in upper secondary
Types of work	n/a
Money from carers	350 – 2,250 baht per week
Types of housing	Concrete houses, mostly detached
Types of household compositions	Both parents (with and without siblings), extended families (with and without siblings/ cousins)

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

Table 4. Basic, general information about wealthy adult participants

Types of carer	Mothers, Fathers
Education levels	Completed primary schooling, completed lower secondary schooling, completed upper secondary schooling, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, PhD
Types of work	Teaching, lecturing, medicine, law, civil service, company department leader, run own business (holiday resorts, factories, property development)
Household incomes	17,500 – 100,000 baht per week
Household savings	31 households with savings 80,000 – 10,000,000 baht
Household debts	3 households (to mortgage lenders) 10,000,000 – 15,000,000 baht

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY

In order to collect 'accurate data', ethnographers violate the canons of positivist research; we become intimately involved with the people we study.

(Bourgois 1995, p.13)

The relationships I had with wealthy participants were very different to those that developed with slum dwellers. Relations with slum dwellers became, especially through participant observation, relatively intimate and defined in several cases by friendship. Relations with wealthy participants remained on the whole distant and formal and focused almost entirely on the research. The difference in levels of intimacy was one of the reasons behind my decision to focus mainly on the slum component of the research in the final analysis and thesis; the intimacy obtained with slum inhabitants meant that I developed a much deeper knowledge of their situations and everyday life-worlds. This section focuses on the issue of relationships and identity in the research undertaken with slum residents.

Researcher-participant relations in the slum were affected by several key features of identity. One of these was age. The age difference between adult researchers and young participants is said to make for an imbalance in power relations and therefore to make access to young people's life-worlds potentially problematic. Arguably this is exacerbated in research that uses an adult interpreter as well as an adult researcher, and especially so in a context such as Thailand where age hierarchy is a particularly significant feature of social relations. However, once I became known to and trusted by young people, they became willing to share their experiences with me. With adult carers I was something of a misnomer; an adult by age but with no partner or children and still studying, and therefore with no experience of the things associated with adulthood around which their daily lives were organised (i.e. negotiating marriage, raising children and working). However, this did not prevent adult carers sharing certain experiences and thoughts with me.

My gender and that of my interpreter also affected researcher-participant relations, although not always in the way I imagined it would. I was keen to collect data with young men and young women, and initially thought that the latter would be more accessible than the former given that Ganya and I are female. However, in some cases, relations of trust and openness developed much more quickly with young men, in particular with those aged seventeen and over, who said they enjoyed the opportunity to discuss their lives at what they felt was an important period of transition from being a child to becoming an adult. Most of the interviews and participant observation with adult carers were with women. Where interviews were with the carers of young participants and where I interviewed the young people first, I asked them to put me in contact with the person they felt was best placed to talk about caring for them and the majority put me in contact with mothers or grandmothers. Where interviews took place with carers first or with carers only, and in participant observation, the majority of research was also with women; it was easier and more socially acceptable for me to make friends, build rapport, and spend time alone with older women than with older men.

My 'race' was another aspect of identity that affected relations with participants, although it operated in different ways with different people. As a white English person I was, especially at the beginning, known simply as *farang*. Participants constantly commented on how white my skin was and how because of this I looked clean, rich or *high-so* (from high society) and how they looked too dark or dirty. One young participant, who had approached me at a food stall and started talking, told me that she did so because she wanted to be friends with a *farang* since this would give her something that her friends at school did not have. Another young participant told me that when we first met she had been scared of me because she had never spoken with a *farang* before, and when I asked her what changed she said 'now I know you, we are friends'. Others expressed a growing curiosity about *farang* life and an increasing confidence to ask me questions about it.

My educational status also affected researcher-participant relations. Some participants, on learning that my research was for a PhD, told me that they were

‘stupid’ or that their ‘thinking was not very good’, although here my relative ignorance of Thai language and culture proved useful in repositioning participants as qualified experts and me as a novice. Some carers turned me into an explicit role model for their children, and some young people turned me and Ganya into private tutors, which I was happy to be as it allowed me to contribute in a positive way and to be seen helping.

My relative material wealth was a further aspect of identity that affected researcher-participant relations. In some cases it was an explicit source of jealousy. As one young participant stated quite candidly: ‘I’m so jealous of you P Bua, you have the money to fly to Thailand and all around the world. I will never have that much money’. In other cases it served to position me as a potential money lender or patron; during my time in the field I was asked by participants to repay gambling debts, buy drugs, clothes, shoes, make-up and food, pay rent and bills, and sponsor young people’s schooling. Every request for money provoked a moral dilemma for me, either because I was opposed to the proposed expenditure, as with gambling and drugs, or because I knew that whilst money was being requested for say food or rent, the participants in question had spent their money on gambling or alcohol consumption. By giving money was I helping or was I contributing to destructive patterns of behaviour? After discussing the issue at length with Ganya I decided to offer small gifts of food whenever I was approached for money. I felt very uncomfortable offering nothing given my obvious material privilege, but firstly I had to monitor my own expenditure, and secondly I felt it important to retain a degree of respect amongst slum dwellers, which I believed would be compromised by being seen as ignorant of the value of money.

I found the material inequality between me and participants an ongoing source of discomfort throughout fieldwork, a constant reminder of the injustices of a socio-economic system which privileges a few – including myself – and punishes the majority, and maybe I never really managed to come to terms with this during my stay in the slum. However I have over time come to see this research as one tiny step

in a much longer journey, hopefully one which will allow me to play a part, however small, in trying to challenge the inequities that fieldwork made so explicit to me.

The differences in researcher-participant identities discussed here were all potential challenges to the interpersonal intimacy required of ethnographic fieldwork, however the friendships that developed over time helped to negate the potential distance posed by them. And yet it is partly because of these friendships that I have found it very difficult to pull back from the everyday concerns, preoccupations and struggles of individual people and see the patterns and theories that apply to them as a group. Friendships with participants have also meant that I have found it difficult to analyse and represent people in this thesis in ways which could be construed negatively and this has, at times, led to a certain (temporary) paralysis.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Khlong Toey slum participants

Fieldwork in the slum began with preliminary, informal, conversations with residents, as a means of developing focus group discussion (FGD) and interview schedules and participant observation guides. The use of FGDs and semi-structured interviews early on was prompted to a degree by the need to be seen to be doing something legitimate; it was extremely difficult to claim a legitimate presence there without being seen to be working, and for a research student this was understood to entail conducting interviews, group discussions or surveys.

Focus group discussions

Two groups of young people, all part of a core sample, participated in focus group discussions, which took place in the grounds of an NGO. One group comprised four seventeen year old young men, and the other comprised two fifteen year old young men, a fifteen year old young woman and a thirteen year old girl. Each group attended three sessions; one about time use and activities, one about money and

material things and one about relationships. In each session participants were supplied with paper and pens and asked to complete a visual representation activity relating to the topic in question; this was intended as a means of introducing issues for discussion and giving young people something to do when they were not talking.



Photograph 22. A focus group discussion with young slum dwellers on the ground floor of the NGO. (Photo: Ganya)

In the first session participants were asked to think of the previous day, draw two clocks, each representing one half of a twenty four hour period, and fill in their activities according the relevant times. Subsequent discussion included questions about whether the information given was typical of daily life, how things varied between weekdays and weekends, and between term-time and school holidays, and how participants felt about their use of time. In the second session participants were asked to think of the previous week and to draw a table of the money they received, where it came from and what they did with it, and to draw pictures of their favourite material objects. Subsequent discussion included questions about whether they felt they had enough money and why their chosen material objects were important to them. In the third session participants were asked to draw a series of concentric circles with themselves in the middle and to mark other people on the paper according to how close they felt to them. Subsequent discussion in this session included questions about what is involved in the relationships depicted. Although pre-defined questions were asked in all sessions in order to stimulate debate, the main intention was that discussions would follow emerging issues. Sessions were recorded, translated and transcribed.

Focus group discussions are promoted in research with young people on the basis that they can help minimise the effects of power imbalances between adult researchers and young participants (Thomas and O’Kane 1998). Whilst objective, age-based and other power inequalities were no doubt in play, the young people in these sessions certainly seemed confident; enough to tease and flirt with one another, sing, dance, chat on their mobile phones, chase each other around the tables, fight, withhold information and often ignore my research agenda altogether. Using FGDs to offset power imbalances between adult researchers and young participants is one thing. Dealing with power imbalances between young people – subjectively felt ones as well as objectively obvious ones – is another, and discrepancies here can function to silence the voices of less powerful group members. During personal interviews several participants spoke of problems experienced with friends who had been present in group discussions, including those pertaining to differences in material wealth and related feelings of inferiority.

Whilst focus groups are useful in giving an insight into socially acceptable scripts, or into the perspectives of dominant people within a group, they can preclude discussion of certain personal experiences and feelings. The perspectives offered during group discussions were often quite different to those offered by the same people during semi-structured interviews and in everyday conversations. During personal interviews and participant observation young people would disclose experiences and feelings that they did not make available during group discussions, prefacing statements with phrases such as, ‘you may think it’s like that because that’s how I am in front of others, but actually it’s not’. For example, during group discussions questions about friendships were mostly met with a list of positive things that friends do for each other such as listening, advising and lending money. In personal interviews and participant observation more in-depth stories concerning friendships and their difficulties were offered.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews took place with the core sample of twenty eight young people. These were conducted in places of their choice. Some chose the grounds of the NGO, some chose the playground of the community school, which doubled as a sports ground and hang out for young people in the evenings and at weekends, some chose benches on the street, some chose food stalls in the community and some chose cafes outside. Young people were asked if they wanted to be interviewed alone or to have a friend present, and both options were pursued, although the vast majority chose to be on their own. Initially I hesitated to conduct semi-structured interviews with young people because of the power imbalance between adult researchers and young participants, especially given that I was working with an interpreter who was older than most young participants and, as I have said, given the prominence of age hierarchy in Thai social relations. However, many of these interviews were rich and rewarding, especially those that took place once rapport was well developed.



Photograph 23. Interviewing a young woman in a street cafe in the slum. (Photo: Ganya)

Two schedules were used with young people: one for thirteen-seventeen year olds and one for those in their early twenties. The former was organised thematically and comprised five main areas, consisting of questions about: time (including how it is spent on a daily basis and feelings about time use), money and material things (including where money comes from, daily expenditure and favourite material objects), relationships (including expectations therein), participants' most difficult, sad and happy times, and questions about the future (including participants' dreams

for the future and their feelings about the possibility of realising them). The schedule for young people in their early twenties focussed on the same substantive areas of interest but was organised chronologically. Both schedules also included questions about basic household information. Most interviews with young people were conducted in Thai and recorded, and translated and transcribed by Ganya. With the exception of one case, the interviews with young people in their early twenties were conducted in English and recorded and transcribed. With the participants who spoke English I felt a more immediate sense of intimacy and understanding of their situations, whilst it took longer to gain a sense of familiarity with those who spoke in Thai. In the one case where a participant did not want to be recorded, notes were taken by me and Ganya and written up afterwards.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty seven adult carers and these took place in participants' homes and work places. The schedules with carers contained three main areas: their lives as young people (including their daily time, relationships and money), caring for young people (including areas of particular concern and difficulty) and their perceptions of the main differences between being a young person now and in the past. All interviews with adult carers were conducted in Thai. Most were recorded, translated and transcribed, and in the two which were not, notes were taken by me and Ganya and written up afterwards.

In addition to the main areas covered in the interview schedules, questions concerning basic household information were also asked of all interviewees, such as questions about education levels, occupations, incomes, assets, debts, housing types and household compositions.



Photograph 24. Interviewing a grandmother in her hut. (Photo: Author)



Photograph 25. Interviewing a grandmother and an uncle (with grandchildren, nieces and nephew present) outside their room. (Photo: Ganya)

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with three staff members from local NGOs and one community police officer, all long-term slum residents working with or for young people in Khlong Toey slum communities. These were intended as a means of ascertaining the wider local significance of issues identified in research with young people and carers. All took place on NGO premises and focused on the nature of the interviewee's work and on the issues they deemed, from experience, to be most pertinent to young people's and carers' lives.

Participant observation

The two main elements of participant observation in this research were naturally-occurring conversations and observation of people's practices. Conversations and observation took place throughout the course of my daily life, for example as I bought food from street vendors, got my clothes and shoes mended, accompanied people as they worked, hung out in the evenings, attended the community gym, frequented the internet shop, and went to local markets, shopping malls, bars and nightclubs with participants.



Photograph 26. Getting my trousers mended.
(Photo: Author)



Photograph 27. Getting my shoes mended.
(Photo: Author)



Photograph 28. Joining a great-grandmother on her trip to sell scrap metal.
(Photo: Author)



Photograph 29. Going on a trip with gym members.
(Photo: Author)



Photograph 30. Having a sing-song.
(Photo: Author)



Photograph 31. Buying day lunch from a street vendor.
(Photo: Author)

As with the group discussions and semi-structured interviews, the focus of participant observation was in line with the selected research topics. With young people I paid particular attention to time, money and material objects, relationships, difficulties, sources of happiness and sadness and dreams for the future. With carers I focussed on caring for young people, their memories of childhood and youth, and their perceptions of the key changes and continuities. Participant observation was conducted with the core samples of young people and carers (i.e. those who had been interviewed), as well as with many more outside these core samples. In some situations – such as at gym sessions – I participated fully and did not consciously ‘observe’ until later when I recorded conversations and activities in a journal. In

other situations – such as at the internet shop – I observed whilst participating, recording conversations and activities as they took place.

Participant observation was extremely useful in building relationships with participants and thereby gaining an in-depth understanding of their everyday lives, of the things which were perhaps so commonplace for them that they were not mentioned during the more formal research sessions, and in highlighting the differences between what people said during interviews or focus group discussions and what they did. However I found participant observation extremely challenging as it entailed a constant attentiveness to whether and how phenomena are relevant to the research topic, and when this itself is broad it can be a confusing and exhausting process (Spradley 1980). I also found it stressful, especially as I became increasingly familiar with people's struggles – which were often not apparent at the initial stages of contact – as potential dangers such as shootings, stabbings and house fires took their toll, and especially as I became increasingly aware of the level of domestic violence towards women and young people. In a sense I had a built-in mechanism for taking time out from what I experienced as a stressful research environment in the wealthy element of the fieldwork, but this too entailed its own challenges; the frequent moves between such degrees of wealth and poverty made the injustices of socio-economic inequality very stark indeed. I found writing a journal and field reports useful in allowing me to process the issues with which I struggled on a daily basis.

Through the use of e-mail, telephone and online social networking systems (MSN, MySpace and Facebook), and through a return visit to Bangkok in the summer of 2007, I have kept in contact with several research participants – mostly young people in their late teens and early twenties. This extended fieldwork allowed me to keep abreast of developments on a more long-term basis, which revealed further dimensions of experience.

Wealthy participants

Data was collected with wealthy participants through interviews and participant observation, although here the main method was by far semi-structured interviewing. The interview schedules were the same as those used in the slum. I conducted participant observation whilst living with a wealthy family for three months, and each time I interviewed a wealthy participant (on average twice weekly). However this was very different from the participant observation conducted in the slum communities. Episodes tended to be quite short and were spread out geographically, and most relationships remained distant, seldom moving beyond a formal, introductory stage. As mentioned earlier, this has been a significant factor in my decision to focus mainly on the urban poor element of the research; the extensive use of participant observation in the slum meant that researcher-participant relationships there developed to a much deeper level than those in the wealthy sample.

In addition to the data collected with research participants, throughout fieldwork I read English language newspapers and regularly asked my interpreters to report on the content of Thai language newspapers in order to gain an understanding of official, or dominant, constructions of young people within the media.

INTERPRETATION

Khlong Toey component

Although I had Thai language lessons for around three months and continued to learn informally during the course of everyday interaction throughout fieldwork, much of the data in this research was accessed through interpreters. In Khlong Toey my interpreter was a young woman called Ganya, who was born and grew up in the slum, was twenty two when I met her and graduated with an English degree during fieldwork. Her command of English, both formal and colloquial, her interpretation and general communication and interpersonal skills were exceptional. She described herself as an atypical Thai woman: 'I am big, I've got curves and I'm taller than most. I live in Khlong Toey, I love to dance to hip hop and I drink – this is not what a Thai girl is supposed to do'. She spent a great deal of her leisure time meeting

foreign travellers in bars and nightclubs and believed that this, as well as her fluency in English, afforded her the ability to look upon her own community and culture with a sense of other norms and perspectives. Early on in the fieldwork Ganya told me that she saw it as her new-found purpose in life to give a voice to the young people in her community, that it was her good *kamma* to have found me to take their stories and hers to a wider audience:

You know, I think it's my duty to tell the world about the kids here in Khlong Toey. This is why I have a gift for languages. And I think I have met you so that we can do this together... I can put their stories into English and you can tell them to people in your country.

(Ganya, pers. comm. January 2007)

Ganya descends from one of the original families to settle in Khlong Toey. When I first met her she thought she was an only child, but was later told that she had two younger half sisters whom she had not met. She lived with her father in a rented room in the building where I was living and understood from personal experience many of the issues that young people in the slum contended with. She grew up in a context of housing insecurity and moved frequently, leaving a trail of rental debt behind her. She was homeless for two years, went hungry on countless occasions, did not know her mother or her mother's whereabouts and her father was an alcoholic who came and went from her life, sometimes taking her savings with him. She used to be the main carer for her grandmother when she was younger. Although there were differences and inequalities between Ganya and other slum participants, most notably in terms of education, people knew that she was one of them – an insider who could empathise with them and with whom they were willing to share their stories. She was well known in her neighbourhood; people would wave to her everywhere she went, stop to chat, ask questions and tell her anecdotes from their day. Ganya provided me with an implicit seal of approval and functioned as a bridge between me and potential participants. However, her insider status and my alignment with her, also precluded certain participants from the research. For example, one of my neighbours was having an affair with Ganya's father and relations between her and Ganya were very acrimonious, and a long-standing and unresolved feud between

Ganya's father and his relatives meant that we could not conduct research with her extended family.

Wealthy component

In the wealthy element of the research my interpreter was a woman named Am. In her early thirties, with a degree in English and Business Management, Am grew up in a western suburb of Bangkok with an older brother and two parents who ran a successful property development business and several rental apartment buildings. Her English, her communication skills and her interviewing techniques were also excellent. When I first met Am she told me that she had heard of the English phrase 'nosey poker' (sic) and felt that it was an apt description of her natural tendency towards discerning the intimate details of people's lives. In many ways our introductory meeting stood as testimony to this; by the end of it she knew about my funding arrangements, my education history, my family and friends at home, how I spent my leisure time and whether I usually eat scones and jam everyday for afternoon tea.

Although Am was an insider in the wealthy component of the research in terms of her background and socio-economic position, and although our introductions to new participants were gained through connections between Am, my wealthy host family's children and their friends, there were several issues which positioned both Am and me as definite outsiders to the young wealthy participants. Perhaps these were partly responsible for the ongoing formality and relative interpersonal distance which characterised the wealthy component of this project. Firstly, Am, along with me, was considerably older than the wealthy young people, there being between sixteen and twenty years difference between us and young participants. Secondly, the research with wealthy young people took place on school premises, in which neither Am nor I could claim other roles which may have contributed to earning more of an insider status, and in which young people were positioned in a very particular way, as rightfully deferential to adult authority. Thirdly, there was no equivalent to the sense of collective experience, history and struggle in the slum and therefore to slum

dwellers' self-conscious associations with place which made it possible to move towards insider status.

Given the reliance on interpretation in both elements of the research, there was considerable potential for two situations to arise; one, for topics of intuitive interest to be left unexplored and appropriate probing questions to be neglected due to my difficulty in keeping up with discussions and two, for conversations to be made so disjointed by interpretation that they became stilted and lost their flow. In fact, both of these situations occurred early on in fieldwork and were dealt with in two main ways. First I continually worked to improve my Thai so that I could follow conversations and ask appropriate questions. Second I examined transcripts of interviews and notes from everyday conversations together with Ganya and Am, pointing to the most useful and interesting sections and explaining what made them so, and pointing to the sections which could have been explored further, giving examples of probing questions and explaining why they would have been useful.

The use of interpretation during fieldwork means that the data collected were mediated, and this arguably makes the potential for distortion considerable. However, participants often corrected Ganya and Am when they reiterated narratives for clarification, and in conversations with both interpreters after data collection sessions it became apparent that they often held widely differing views to participants, indicating that their opinions had not overly influenced what participants felt able to say.

Early on in fieldwork I asked Am and Ganya to transcribe and translate a number of interviews that the other had conducted, to test the reliability of their work. This was a useful and reassuring process, as both interpreters produced very similar transcripts of the other's interviews and further, Ganya was able to supply additional background information on certain issues pertaining to slum life and translate the slang used by slum dwellers, with which Am was not familiar.

ETHICS

The issue of ethics has been relevant throughout this entire research project and it may therefore be misleading to have a discrete section on it here, within a discussion confined to the fieldwork process. My initial decision to research with young people in slum communities (as well as others) speaks of a concern with socio-economic inequality and a desire to speak out against it somehow and in this sense the research has, for me, been an ethical enterprise from the very outset. Further, once I left the field, ethical considerations became inseparable from the process of interpretation, and have formed a significant part of my struggle to determine how to analyse and represent participants in a way that accurately reflects their perspectives and experiences yet which will not be humiliating for them. However for the purposes of this section I take three of the most basic issues concerning research ethics in the field – informed consent, confidentiality/ anonymity and avoiding harm – and explain the challenges associated with each and the steps I took in order to address them.

Informed consent

Within more formal data collection sessions ensuring informed consent was relatively straightforward. Within interviews and focus group discussions I explained to participants that I was a student from the UK trying to find out about young people in Bangkok from different backgrounds by spending time with them and conducting interviews with them and their significant others. I explained that I would be writing a long report that would be read and assessed by university academics. In these sessions informed consent was given and withheld verbally and non-verbally. I was told by my translator, by an academic in the Anthropology department at Chulalongkorn University and by two NGO staff members that asking for written consent was inappropriate because forms are symbolic of a level of formality that was unsuitable. Some people gave consent verbally but withheld it physically by not turning up to appointments, and others were verbally explicit about not wanting to take part. Those with whom research did take place are those who gave their consent by agreeing verbally and by attending research sessions and sharing their stories with me. Even then some participants did not consent to discuss certain topics, signified

by a shake of the head, silence or a nervous giggle. At the end of interviews and focus group discussions I asked for participant's consent to use their information in my research report, and on the three occasions when participants asked me not to write about particular issues the relevant sections of transcripts have been omitted.

Informed consent in participant observation is more complex. Over time the boundaries between research and non-research time, and between my role as researcher, friend, neighbour, customer and service-user became increasingly blurred, most notably in the slum setting. It would be dishonest to claim that I told every person whose views have informed this research that their narratives would be taken into consideration, or even that those in the core samples remembered my research purposes in the course of everyday interactions not primarily focused on the research, and that therefore their day-to-day sharing of information amounted to ongoing consent. There were increasing instances when my role as researcher was less obvious, for example on occasions during 'leisure' time when research was not the primary intended activity but when important and interesting issues arose. However I tried to find ways of reminding people that I was researching on an informal, everyday basis, for example by commenting on writing about particular events in my report. Sometimes this brought conversations to a close and at other times it prompted people to expand their narratives. In terms of the ongoing fieldwork I have conducted electronically since returning to the UK, participants have given their permission for me to use the additional information in this research.

Whenever I took photographs of participants where they would be identifiable it was always with their permission, and permission was always sought to include them in this report. Given that I was using a digital camera with a viewing screen it was easy to show people the pictures I had taken of them and thereby ensure that consent in this sense was also informed. Where photographs have been included in this thesis, I have not linked the subjects to the data about them.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are about protecting the privacy and personal information of research participants, and these are relevant at two stages, during data collection and in the writing of research reports. Ensuring privacy when I was alone with participants and our time together was undisturbed was relatively straightforward, no-one but the participant in question and I was privy to the information exchanged. However, this scenario was quite rare, and therefore ensuring privacy was challenging. First, most of the research was conducted through interpreters and second, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and everyday conversations often became public events as people would stop by to listen and sometimes join in, particularly in the slum communities. In this sense the notion of privacy was somewhat at odds with local norms governing social interaction, and I followed the latter rather than trying to impose a rule which was inappropriate for the context.

In terms of protecting participant's personal information in this report, I have used pseudonyms, and this has been a straightforward exercise. In most cases I have omitted the names of the particular slum communities where participants resided, with the exception of one case (in chapter five) where I name it because it is intrinsic to the story I tell and the argument I make. I have named the slum because of issues arising from its uniqueness which are relevant to the study. I have omitted the names of the schools at which I researched with the wealthy young people. Despite using pseudonyms, ensuring that participants and their data are not identifiable to potential readers is problematic, as people can be identified by more than their name, for example by combinations of information on age, gender, family background and occupation. Each of these factors has been important in the analysis and interpretation of data and has therefore been left unaltered.

Avoiding harm

Avoiding harm to participants is one of the most fundamental principles in research ethics. Whilst one can easily avoid inflicting physical harm, the matter is somewhat

complicated in research which unintentionally evokes painful emotions and memories and where participants find it upsetting or distressing to talk about certain issues. In all cases where emotional pain was visible or suspected, participants were given the option to terminate or pause the discussion, or to move on to other, more comfortable topics. Only one participant terminated an interview whilst others carried on, stating that it was good to talk about the difficulties they were experiencing. The issue of harm is especially complicated in a context where participants disclose harm inflicted on them by others, when participant observation reveals disturbing levels of domestic violence and where this is a common occurrence. Whilst researching in the slum I witnessed many instances of violence towards participants, young people and women in particular, and was told by them of many more, and I deliberated at length over how best to respond. I sought advice from Ganya, who suggested that I do nothing on the basis that such violence was a normal part of everyday life, albeit wrong. I spoke with a child protection officer working for an NGO who referred me to a member of staff in a different NGO who was on long term sick leave. I consulted a child rights expert who advised me to 'bear witness' to the violence that took place, and I discussed disclosure with two of the participants with whom I was particularly close, both of whom were horrified at the thought of me telling anyone of their experiences. Morrow and Richards (1996) argue that adult researchers have an ethical obligation to protect young people at risk from harm, however it is by no means clear what this entails in practice (Montgomery 2007). In the end my approach was to listen to the young people who decided to disclose their experiences to me, to ask them if there was anything they would like me to do, and to write about what I witnessed.

Ethics in research with young people

In research involving young people ethical issues are said to merit special attention on the basis of disparities in power between adult researchers and young participants, and on the basis that such disparities may for example make non-participation or withdrawal on the part of young participants difficult. Whilst I clearly embodied objective social power in terms of age and in terms of other axes of social difference, as noted above, the assumption that this has to be ethically problematic is misleading.

It does not take into account the many ways in which young people refuse to participate if and when they wish, the ways in which they can turn events quite skilfully to their own advantage, or the ways in which they influence events and other people in particular situations, for example by turning research activities into karaoke sessions.

Thomas and O’Kane (1998) claim that ‘ethical problems in research involving direct contact with children can be overcome by using a participatory approach’ in choosing topics, methods and data interpretation (p.336). In this research the approach advocated by Thomas and O’Kane was not fitting; participants did not want to be involved in these areas despite my initial attempts to engage them. It was not that they did not want to take part in the research at all; those who were involved provided information that they were comfortable with and made it clear, in various ways, when my questions were becoming a nuisance or too intrusive. Rather, participants did not want to take on responsibility for work which they saw as mine, especially given the considerable pressure on their time to support their families, study, work, and be young people in the particular ways demanded of them by their circumstances. I was sensitive to their refusals to answer questions, helped where I could by responding to the various requests made by young people, for example for help learning English, and respected their wishes to leave the business of research design and analysis to me.

PART III: ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION

For the eye altering alters all...

And the flat earth becomes a ball

(William Blake, The Mental Traveller)

Analysis in ethnographic research refers to the process of turning data into a story, or stories, that the ethnographer then imparts to her readership (LeCompte and Schensul 1999b). In this study, the process of creating a story started during fieldwork, although it began in earnest once I left the field and started writing, and has evolved gradually, with many twists and turns, dead-ends and false starts along the way.

I returned to the UK in October 2006 and began coding the data I had collected using NVivo. This entailed reading transcripts and journal entries and generating hundreds of codes, some pertaining to the research topic areas, some pertaining to types of responses given to questions, some pertaining to themes that cross-cut all areas of the research topic, and some pertaining to people. It was at this point that I decided to focus mainly on the slum element of the research, as I felt that giving equal space to both slum and wealthy components would entail too great a sacrifice in terms of analytical depth. I decided to draw on the data from wealthy participants only as it was relevant to arguments I would make concerning those living in urban poverty.

Having decided to focus mainly on the data from the slum, I read the information relating to each code repeatedly and selected seven themes to focus on, chosen on the basis of those that reflected the most prominent elements of everyday life for participants, and which I found particularly interesting and important. These were: *consumer practices*, *gendered subjectivities*, *friendship relations*, *carer relations*, *parental absences*, *violence* and *material hardship*, although I subsequently dropped some of these altogether due to limitations of space, gave some prominence as

chapter topics in their own right, and tried to weave others into the discussion throughout data chapters.

Even with the selection of certain themes the study still needed an overarching, unifying topic within which they could be discussed, and a way of structuring discussion of them within empirical chapters. Through the iterative, and sometimes frustrating, processes of immersion in the data, writing, engagement with various literatures and continuing dialogue with several key informants, the notion of *searching for a better life* emerged as a particularly prominent and encompassing issue, which took in the selected themes and resonated with local, national and global discourses on development. Whilst the themes I identified could all be conceptualised within this overarching topic, *searching for a better life* should be understood as an even broader phenomenon, with discussion in this thesis restricted to certain elements of it. With this over-arching topic and the focal themes in mind I identified three empirical chapter topics; *living the teenage life*, *contributing to the family*, and *building better material futures*.

Interpretation in ethnographic research refers to the process of giving meaning to the stories produced through data analysis (LeCompte and Schensul 1999c). The meanings I have given to the stories chosen for this thesis have shifted considerably over time, and I have found the process of interpretation (and writing about it) to be one of the most challenging aspects of the research journey.

I initially interpreted young people's attempts to build better lives – to engage in global youth cultures, to support their families and to try and escape material hardship – as successful and I interpreted them as exerting a significant degree of control over their lives and identities and the circumstances in which they live. On reflection I believe that the key reasons for this were firstly a prior alignment with the 'new' social studies of childhood which is heavily geared towards seeking out and emphasising young people's agency, and secondly a result of my closeness to participants and therefore to their own understandings of themselves and their

situations. On many occasions and in many ways they constructed themselves very positively and as successful, or at least as hopeful of success. Wacquant (2002) refers to the risk that the ethnographer can

... get so close to its subjects that it ends up parroting their point of view without linking it to the broader system of material and symbolic relations that give it meaning and significance

(Wacquant 2002, p.1523)

However, as time elapsed after fieldwork, during which I became more immersed in the data and more distant from participants (albeit in contact with several of them), it became clear to me that ‘success’ stories were often relatively short-lived, and that situations can and do change all too readily. As the physical and emotional distance between me and participants grew I became increasingly engaged with and aligned to other literatures (in particular ethnographic studies that revealed the reproductive outcomes of cultural practice or agency) which made me alert to the possibility that the practices of participants in my study may also carry unintended, or counter-productive consequences. I began to question whether the participants in my study were different from those in, for example, Bourgois’ or Abu-Lughod’s ethnographies, or whether the difference lay more in my interpretation of them. Underpinning this questioning was the niggling sense that all might not be so rosy on the eastern front and that I needed to extract myself emotionally from ‘my’ subjects. This process was a difficult one for me, partly because it involved an inordinate amount of re-writing, and as it gave rise to a tension between my ethical obligations to represent participants as accurately as possible and the knowledge that this may lead to a certain humiliation on their part, especially given the extremely high value participants place on maintaining their public image and not ‘losing face’. In the end a nuanced and detailed understanding of those living in urban poverty, rather than positive spin, prevailed and will hopefully be of greater contribution in the long run.

In my search for the possible unintended outcomes of young slum dwellers' practices, I recast my analytical net and revisited the data I had about slum youth from young people themselves, adult carers in the slum, from wealthy participants and from media and government sources. At this point I began to make connections between young slum dwellers' practices in the search for a better life, the meanings attached to them by numerous people (including themselves), the wider contexts in which their practices took place, and the outcomes of their endeavours. This multiplicity of interpretations, whilst initially a source of confusion for me, has become a central theme running throughout the empirical chapters that follow.

Interpretation in this research has been a process of continual evolution. Once I completed the empirical chapters (or so I thought), it was clear that the literature chapter needed substantial re-writing, as the two were now considerably out of sync with each other. And so I returned to the literature chapter, re-angling my previous discussion of certain studies in order to correspond to my re-interpretation of the data, and selecting different literatures that I now considered more relevant. For example, whilst I had initially thought of the literature on Thai youth as unconnected to my study (because of being focussed on risk and destruction), by exploring how other scholars approached the literature sections in their studies (in particular Montgomery's [2000] chapter *Abandonment and child prostitution in a Thai slum community*) I began to see a way of writing about this literature that would turn its apparent irrelevance to my advantage. I began to see that it had certain tendencies and contained certain emphases that my research problematised and could thereby contribute to.

This rewriting of the literature chapter prompted a return to the empirical chapters in order to incorporate the new literature into the latter and to make clear the contribution that my data made to existing knowledge. Once I had a literature and three empirical chapters that corresponded to each other I began to write the concluding chapter, and in the process of doing this I began to identify connections between each of the empirical chapters that had not occurred to me before. And so I

returned once again to the empirical chapters to update them according to the new connections I had made.

It is tempting to think in terms of a final, conclusive story that sits latent in the data, waiting patiently for the critical eye of the researcher to elicit it and present it to others. However, the process of constructing an interpretive story is an iterative and potentially never ending one, as more can always be read, more connections can always be made and more can always be written. Part of the learning in this is to know when the story one tells, the connections one makes and the contributions one offers to selected literatures are enough. I was once told that one never really ‘finishes’ a PhD; rather, one has to abandon it at some point (Jo Pheonix, pers. comm. January 2007). I have ‘abandoned’ this thesis at a point where, I believe, the stories it tells are clear, internally coherent, sensitive to the nuances and subtleties of participants’ lives and sufficiently linked to the chosen literatures to make an original contribution to the understanding of marginalised youth living in a context of rapid socio-economic transformation.

CHAPTER 4

LIVING THE TEENAGE LIFE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses what was referred to amongst research participants in the slum as *cheewit wairoon*, or ‘the teenage life’¹⁹. It opens with a vignette which describes a typical Friday evening in the lives of a group of young men and a group of young women, before offering some preliminary notes concerning the scope of discussion in this chapter and an outline of the key elements selected for investigation. The next section explores some of the prominent meanings that young people attached to the practices outlined, the outcomes of those practices and some of their unintended side effects. It also points to the salient elements of the context in which participants are located and to the paradoxes that characterise their endeavours to live the teenage life; the contradictory ways in which their practices are at once condemned yet required of them by the consumer market. Discussion then turns briefly to the experiences of wealthy participants, which points to some of the similarities and differences in living the teenage life according to socio-economic status. The chapter concludes by offering some reflections on the implications of the arguments made for the relevant literature introduced in chapter two of the thesis, and by pointing to some of the broader theoretical implications of these arguments.

¹⁹ As noted in the previous chapter, whilst the English term ‘teenager’ refers to thirteen-nineteen year olds, participants in this research use it with reference to those between the ages of around fifteen and twenty two.

VIGNETTE

It is 6 p.m. and Arun, Jim, Som and Em, or *Bodyfit* as they call themselves collectively, arrive at the community gym in the front courtyard of a local NGO. The gym opens between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. six days a week and *Bodyfit* are among the twenty or so young people who attend regularly. They arrive together, as they usually do, saunter through the gates and find somewhere to warm up. Every month or so they arrive with different hair; a new cut or style or a different colour. Today they have died their hair blond. Sometimes they arrive with a new gadget which they take turns to use and show to the captive audience of younger teenage girls who await their arrival eagerly and tease them mercilessly. Today Arun has an MP3 player and sings loudly, in English, to a song he does not understand. Once *Bodyfit* have paid their respects to their elders at the gym, responded to comments about their new hair and claimed a space in which to warm up, they begin the serious business of working out.

They take off their tops, feigning embarrassment when one of the girls calls out flirtatiously for someone to pass her a pair of sunglasses, start with a short warm up of stretches, bends and twists before collecting a set of rusty weights from a broken filing cabinet that serves as a store cupboard. Each day of the week they work on a different part of the body, and today they concentrate on their arms. As the evening wears on the weights get heavier, the space taken up by the boys increases, and the noises that accompany their physical exertion get louder. They make frequent trips to the toilet inside the NGO, where they lean over the sinks to inspect their faces in the mirrors, pouting, fixing their hair, flexing their muscles and practising different body-building poses. Half way through the evening P Sep, the gym's founder and instructor, brings out a full-length mirror and props it up against some railings. *Bodyfit*, along with the other boys and young men, set about covering themselves in body oil and take it in turns to pose in front of the mirror, seeing how long they can hold different positions, touching and complimenting each other, enquiring into the length of time it takes to develop certain muscles and looking beyond their own reflections to see who is watching them. P Sep passes around a few body-building magazines and the boys pore over them and argue about which body is better and

which they would choose for themselves. The gym session ends, as it always does, with an arm-wrestling competition and emphatic declarations of the evening's winner, which is usually Arun. At the end of the session, after a few last glances in the mirror, the *Bodyfit* boys help to pack away, pay their respects, sling their tops over their shoulders and swagger off, shoulders hunched, to Arun's house where they eat and get ready for their appearance at the internet shop.

The *Bodyfit* members arrive at the internet shop at around 10 p.m. and stay, as usual, until around 1 a.m. when it closes, except for Jim who leaves to work for Arun's mother at midnight. The internet shop has a floor space of about twenty square metres, twenty seven computers and countless stools and chairs, and is usually packed with young people. On most evenings there is a queue for computers but *Bodyfit* rarely have to wait; they are friends with the owner's nephew who manages the shop, and always get at least two computers between them, close to the air-conditioning with web cams attached. Since the gym session the boys have washed, styled their hair, applied copious amounts of body spray, made themselves up and dressed in baggy jeans, flip-flops and sports T-shirts which they have modified by cutting a deep V at the neck to expose their chests, and cutting off the sleeves so that their recently-sculpted biceps are on full display. They wear chunky silver chains around their necks, belts which sit loosely on their hips and sunglasses, although it is dark outside and dimly lit inside.

Their arrival is met with teasing comments from some of the regular girls in the shop: 'who will you marry tonight?', 'you never told me you were a superstar', 'oooooh you're so *high-so*', which in turn inspire flirtatious replies or the same feigned embarrassment shown at the gym, and always smiles that seem to speak of a contentment derived from being noticed. The boys go to their computers, order bottled fizzy drinks and begin setting themselves up for the evening's activities, uploading their favourite on-line games, downloading hip-hop music, adjusting the settings on the web cam to ensure the most flattering exposure, and opening the on-line networking programmes they use to meet and keep in touch with other young people. These preparatory activities are conducted with frequent glances to the other

customers and towards the entrance to the shop, a way I suspect of keeping an eye out for anyone who warrants impressing.

Each of the *Bodyfit* members has special on-line names, which they often use in their everyday interactions with each other, and always at the internet shop. These are English names and chosen on the basis of either 'sounding good', belonging to western pop stars, reflecting the experience of unrequited love or indicating care and pride in physical appearance.

Bodyfit are masters of on-line multi-tasking. Whilst new rounds of their favourite on-line game are uploaded the three of them who use My Space check their accounts, update their profiles, upload new photos of themselves (usually flexing their muscles in body-building poses) and send messages to other on-line networkers. Two members of *Bodyfit* use MSN Messenger, an on-line instant chat service which also allows users to build a profile and display photos, and additionally to invite other users to watch them via a web cam. They spend a good deal of time grooming themselves before they activate the web cams, fiddling with their hair, smoothing their eyebrows and arranging their tops to reveal their muscles. An informal and light-hearted competition exists between *Bodyfit's* three on-line networkers over the number, gender and nationality of their on-line 'friends'; the more the better, the more girls the better and the more girls from rich south east Asian countries the better. Best of all a *farang* girl; when one of them made MSN contact with a white, English girl he met at a pub during her trip around the world, the entire clientele at the internet shop was informed and invited to look at her via the web cam. On this occasion she is not online and at midnight I leave a rather dejected looking Arun and make my way to Ganya's place.

Ganya has invited me to her room and then out to a club with her and two friends and as I approach the building where we live I hear giggles and tinny hip-hop music coming from her open window. I let myself in and walk down the hallway, past piles of rubbish and broken machinery and the spirit house that sits in the old tree in the

yard. I go up the stairs, past the graffiti of guns and hearts on the wall, onto the landing where someone has hung their washing over a bamboo pole to dry, and into Ganya's room where she, An and Su are getting ready. They have been to P Ning's beauty kiosk and had their hair extended and curled, their nails painted and their eyebrows shaped and are now getting dressed and made-up for the night. There is a low plastic table crammed with brand-name body creams, perfumes, lipsticks, blushers, eye-shadows, eye-liners, mascaras and boxes of earrings, and it grows increasingly chaotic as Ganya applies and re-applies make-up to everyone. When she is satisfied she turns to her clothes rail and begins to assemble outfits for the three of them. Within half an hour they are all standing in front of the cracked, full-length mirror giggling and clapping in admiration at their mini skirts, hot pants, spaghetti-strap tops and high-heeled shoes. Ganya puts the finishing touches to her ensemble – a huge pair of hoop earrings and some lip-gloss 'to add a little mmmm', declares that she looks '*bling-bling* leaow' (bling-bling now), and wonders aloud whether we will meet any rich, handsome men tonight.

We leave the house and head to the main road to hail a taxi. As we wait Ganya gives An and Su some tips on how to walk; she struts a few paces down the street pushing her bottom emphatically from side to side (in her words 'shaking my booty'), then turns and waits for them to do the same. Amidst much giggling they do, whilst Ganya issues instructions to stick their chests out, push their shoulders back, hold their heads high and be brave. In the taxi Ganya gets a phone call from another friend who she has planned to meet at the club and although her friend is Thai they hold their conversation in English, which An and Su admire and envy openly.

When we arrive at the club we find a table and hover around it, shouting staccato sentences to each other and struggling to hear above the music. After a few drinks Ganya shows An and Su how to dance, performing a routine that she devised through observing on-line hip-hop videos at *Ran Net* and practising in front of the mirror in her room. She bends her knees and gyrates her hips, holds her arms above her head then runs her hands down her torso and up again, leaning forward to pout every now and then. An and Su try to imitate her but fall, laughing, against the table after a few

seconds, and instead watch as Ganya edges her way closer to a group of young European men standing around a table in front of ours. When one of her favourite songs comes on (*Drop it like it's hot* by American rapper Snoop Dogg) Ganya beckons for An and Su to join her, and they look on as she reaches forward on every repetition of 'hot' and pinches each of the young men's bottoms in turn. Most of the young men react by returning the gesture. At 4 a.m., after several more drinks and numerous trips to the toilet to re-apply make-up, marvel at the other clubber's outfits and lament the relative shabbiness of their own, Ganya suggests we go home as she is teaching at 9 a.m. In the taxi An and Su are keen to know what the men's bottoms felt like and Ganya tells them that they will have to find out for themselves next time. They agree²⁰.

THE TEENAGE LIFE: PRELIMINARY NOTES

In response to interview and focus group questions, and in everyday conversations, young participants often prefaced or concluded their narratives and statements concerning the practices described above with phrases such as 'this is the life of teenagers' or 'this is the teenage life'. Adult carers also made sense of certain practices common amongst young people with reference to the 'teenage life', often claiming that they never lived this life because it did not exist for them when they were younger.

In this chapter discussion focuses on three selected key practices pertaining to the teenage life, namely body work, commodity consumption and going out. This list is far from exhaustive; there was much more involved in the teenage life as it was lived by young participants, including certain linguistic practices such as the use of slang, and certain relationships such as *gik* relations (casual alliances based on sexual attraction). The selected practices dealt with here are those which were particularly

²⁰ As should be evident from this vignette, a good deal of participants' practices vis-a-vis living the teenage life involved participation in hip-hop culture. It is important to note here that whilst the story of hip-hop may have begun in 1970s in the Bronx among people of African and Jamaican descent resisting their social marginalisation (Osumare 2001), the way in which it is practised by participants in this research carries none of the connotations of rebellion against marginalisation claimed of its historical roots.

visible during fieldwork and about which most commentary and controversy (at the local and national levels) reigned. The boundaries between what I have separated out as discrete sets of practices are, in reality, blurred, but are treated as distinct here to enable analysis.

Many of the practices characteristic of the teenage life were common to people of all ages. The boundaries between everyday life in the slum and the teenage life were porous, not least because it was often the way in which practices were undertaken, the amount of time, money and effort put into them, the importance attached to them and the intentions behind them rather than the practices themselves which defined them as peculiar to young people. My purpose here is not to provide a definitive record of what does and does not count as the teenage life, a task that would no doubt be fraught from the outset with categorial confusion. Rather it is to explore the prominent meanings that young people and others attached to the selected key practices, and to explore their outcomes, both intended and unintended.

Related to this, some of the adult carers were quite close in age to some of the young people, and some were likely to have aspired to the 'teenage life' themselves when they were younger, despite a common insistence to the contrary. The 'facts' of the matter, which can only be approached through memory and are therefore open to recall bias, are, for the purposes of this discussion, incidental; adult carer narratives are used here not as windows into a past reality but for what they show of the ways in which contemporary young slum dwellers were perceived and defined.

The teenage life was gendered, both in terms of the way in which young people engaged in certain practices and in terms of the consequences that ensued. Discussion here deals with similarities and differences between young men and young women, and thereby omits exploration of 'ladyboys', sometimes referred to in the Thai context as the 'third sex' or the 'third gender'. I made a decision early on in fieldwork that in order to do justice to issues pertaining to ladyboys a separate study

would be needed and therefore the particularities relating to their engagement in the teenage life are not covered in this discussion.

It was mainly older young people (i.e. young women aged fifteen and above and young men aged seventeen and above) who engaged in the teenage life. Whilst not all older young people in the slum participated in all elements of it, broad engagement was widespread amongst the older young people in this study.

KEY PRACTICES

As mentioned above, this chapter focuses on three elements of the teenage life: body work, commodity consumption and going out, all of which can be understood in terms of engagement in the global culture industry (Lash and Lury 2007) and its attendant structures. 'Body work' refers to the time and effort that young people put into fashioning their bodies and can be separated out into several constituent parts: grooming practices (such as the styling of hair and manicure of nails, the application of body creams and fragrances and the use of make-up), sculpting practices (such as body-building and working out, aimed at the production of particular body shapes and the accentuation of certain body parts), dressing the body in ways that indicate participation in current fashions, adorning the body with jewellery and accessories (such as belts, sunglasses and bags) and moving the body in certain ways (such as walking with a swagger or a wiggle of the hips). In this context 'commodity consumption' refers to the purchase and use of branded commodities such as mobile phones, MP3 players, digital cameras, clothes, shoes, accessories, jewellery and grooming products. It also refers to the purchase and use of internet time. Importantly, this consumption does not entail having the actual money with which to sustain the purchase and use of these things, as indebtedness, borrowing and theft were common amongst young people, as was going without basic necessities in order to finance such consumption. 'Going out' refers here to locating oneself outside the home, unaccompanied by adults, in the streets, cafés and bars of the slum, and outside slum neighbourhoods in shopping malls, cinemas, karaoke booths, bowling alleys, and cafés, and for older young people in pubs, bars and nightclubs.

MEANINGS AND CONSEQUENCES

The meanings attached to the practices discussed here are multiple and varied, however, as with the key practices, this chapter focuses on certain selected (and interrelated) meanings. I have chosen to concentrate on a select few in some detail rather than attempt to deal with them all as they are too numerous to do justice to within the space limitations of this chapter. Those selected, I believe, are particularly pertinent to exploring some of the most important yet under-recognised issues surrounding the construction of youth in the context of urban poverty and socio-economic transformation. The following discussion is structured in such a way that particular meanings are attached to particular practices. This is another analytical device; in reality the meanings may be applicable to a range of practices but are separated out here for the purposes of clarity.

High-so youth

Young people commonly described their body work and consumption practices in terms of being *high-so*, or *bling-bling*, both of which denote wealth. However, without the material resources which would actually characterise them as wealthy, trying to *look* the part took on a particular significance. The opening vignette highlighted the time, money and effort that *Bodyfit* and Ganya and her friends spent on a typical Friday night in an attempt to create images of wealth, and pointed to the satisfaction they derived from being recognised by other slum dwellers in this way. Other young people in this research were similarly keen to construct such images of themselves. As twenty two year old Sim commented: ‘people they judge other people from their looks. If you don’t dress very *bling-bling* they won’t see you. It’s like that’.

On one occasion during fieldwork an elderly staff member of a slum-based NGO commented that he could not always tell young slum dwellers apart from others ‘outside’, such was the extent of their efforts to make themselves look *high-so*. He stated that ‘they dress nicely and they have good shoes and mobile phones. You might never know they are poor people from the slum’. In a post-fieldwork e-mail to Note, a twenty two year old young man who, at the time of fieldwork, was living in one of the slum’s orphanages, I commented that young participants seemed particularly preoccupied with looking *high-so*, and he replied with the following:

People judge and classify people by how wealthy they are. This may seem like superficial but it really matters in Thailand, especially when it comes to how people treat you. Unfortunately people in slum Khlong Toey are look down on as inferior by society. So people in slum Khlong Toey want to look good, like wealthy since society has such a negative perspective to them. People in slum Khlong Toey DREAM!! they dream BIG!! They want people in society to accept them and if society cannot so they will try and climb up until that point.

(Note, email, April 2007)

Young people’s attempts to create *high-so* images were born in part of an awareness of their material status as *kon jon* (poor people), *kon chan dtam* (people of the low level) or *dek slum* (slum children), derived from living in Khlong Toey slum, and a desire to be free from the stigma these carried. During her life history interview Sim reflected on her initial realisation that society is comprised of those who ‘have’ and those who do not, and of the way in which this is reflected in how people dress:

I started seeing the social things when I was about fifteen. I started to see how the society works. I was growing up and becoming a teenager and I could see the things around me, I could see the social. You have to understand it is different in the slum from outside. I can say the way people dress is different,

my friends outside they are rich, they have very, very nice clothes, brand names shirts, expensive things you know, and when they're out they dress like princesses and it's very normal for them. It's like the look, you can tell the difference... Sometimes I got very upset that 'why? How come they have and I don't have?' just kept asking, kept asking myself.

Other young people, in particular those who attended school outside slum communities²¹, recounted experiences of disputes with peers at school in which they were ostracised from friendship groups on the basis of being *kon chan dtam* or *dek slum*. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with a young woman named Am:

Well there was a big, serious fight with my friends at school... Mint was supposed to visit me and Fah but her boyfriend told her 'don't go because that place is shit, there is shit everywhere and the people there are low'. How could he say that? It really hurt me. Mint and the other girls in the group took his side, they didn't come and now she says that the people here are *kon chan dtam*... I know that some parents at the school want their kids to stay away from us because they are afraid of *dek slum*.

Am and the other young slum dwellers in this research tried hard to distance themselves from the low-level status imposed upon them in light of the poverty they experienced, and in this they relied heavily on their physical bodies – in this sense their main assets – adorning them as best they could with consumer commodities in an attempt to present themselves as high status and therefore socially acceptable. However, as the data presented above illustrates, escaping their low socio-economic status in this way was in a sense an elusive dream. Firstly they could only operate at the superficial level of appearances, and whilst the 'surface level' is enormously

²¹ The community school in the central hub of Khlong Toey slum communities teaches up to lower secondary level, and those continuing education beyond this stage travel outside their immediate neighbourhoods to other schools. Also, some of the slum communities are located nearer to other schools than the one in the central hub.

important in Thai social relations (as indicated in the above excerpts and as discussed in Van Esterik's 2000 book *Materilazing Thailand*), having the material means with which to substantiate surface-level claims to high status is equally, if not more, significant.

Second, young people's hard-won appearances did not really make the grade beyond the borders of the slum. Despite their best efforts to create *high-so* appearances, participants continued to be identified by outsiders (and often to identify themselves) as *kon chan dtam*. Whilst young people's carefully crafted images may have worked on other slum dwellers in terms of creating the illusion of wealth (in particular on older generations, younger children and those in situations of extreme hardship), this illusion faded away all too easily when transplanted outside of the slum environment. Trainers that were the envy of peers at the gym became tatty and defunct when they paced the floors of the city's glitzy shopping malls. Mobile phones, MP3 players and digital cameras that produced a queue of admirers and would-be borrowers at the internet shop became clunky and out of date alongside the latest models brandished across the enormous advertising billboards that towered above the expressways leading into the slum. And *bling bling* outfits that created intense excitement within the confines of the slum walls quickly became a source of discomfort next to the latest fashions paraded at the city's trendy night clubs. As Mills notes in her study of migrant workers in Bangkok, the consumption patterns of people constrained by low incomes:

...offer only a weak approximation of up-to-date urban living. There are always more and newer commodities to acquire... Surrounded by the city's hypermodernity and intense commercialisation... access to and control over the extensive cultural repertoire of 'being up-to-date' is partial at best

(Mills 1997, p.47)

In addition to operating at the superficial level of appearances, and not really achieving the desired images within the broader context anyway, in the process of trying to create images of wealth young slum dwellers unwittingly contributed to a perception of themselves as *self-centred, materialistic teenagers*. This perception applies in particular to young women. Ganya's father often despaired openly at the expense entailed in her evenings out, kicking her shoes around the room and calculating how many plates of rice he could have bought for the cost of one pair. Others were similarly unimpressed with the drain on financial resources and the self-interest assumed to define young people's actions:

My daughter has to have what others have, the good mobile phone, the clothes that are in fashion. In the past I wanted the things other people had but it wasn't important, I could be patient (*jai yen*, or cool heart) and just have the wish in my mind. It was just a wish, not something necessary. But now my daughter is so impatient (*jai rorn*, or hot heart). She has to have these things. I tell her that we don't have money so it's hard to get these things, but she is not interested in my explanation. She thinks only of herself.

(Mother of fifteen year old young woman)

Commentary on the self-centredness and materialism of young men was relatively absent, but where it did exist was often of a more light-hearted nature, due in part to lower expectations of their orientation towards, and contributions to, the family (discussed more fully in the following chapter). When I interviewed the mother of a fifteen year old young man who had that day spent five hundred baht (equivalent to half her weekly income) getting his hair dyed blonde, she laughed heartily as she watched her son dancing on the other side of the street with his group of friends, all of whom had the same hair style, and declared 'it's crazy, spending money on such hair. It's very expensive. Why doesn't he give that money to me? Ha ha ha'.

In Thailand there is a pervasive discourse which assumes a causal connection between material wealth and high moral status, riches being taken by some as physical evidence of accrued merit (*bun*). The accrual of merit is one of the fundamental principals within Theravada Buddhism and is achieved through the performance of good deeds, or ‘wholesome actions’ (Mills 1999, p.73). As Montgomery (2001) notes, also from research conducted in a slum in Thailand; ‘Money is a symbolic assertion of merit because it is assumed that without merit there would be no ability to get money’ (p.110). Conversations I had with participants revealed echoes of this sentiment. For example, in discussions about the King of Thailand, people often stated that he is rich because he must have been very meritorious in previous life cycles. However, as indicated, for young people in the slums the *high-so* image was only that – an image, one that was unsupported by material wealth and further, one that was understood by adult carers to be sought at the expense of the family, particularly for young women. Without sufficient money to substantiate the appearance of material wealth and support their families to the degree expected of them, young slum dwellers (especially young women) were cast as self-centred and their moral status thereby diminished.

The narrative of the self-centred, materialistic teenager was prevalent amongst adult carers in the slum, and this narrative existed within a complex and contradictory context in which self-interest, in particular in the forms of consumerism and materialism, were both publicly condemned and widely condoned. The following excerpt is taken from an article published in *The Nation*:

Today’s youth tend to be superficial, self-indulgent and dependent on others... a privy councillor said yesterday. Phichit Kulavanich said he was worried that children were... becoming more and more materialistic.

(*The Nation* 20/08/2005)

A few months later, in response to what was perceived and increasingly portrayed in the media as a morally questionable descent into materialism, the Thai Ministry of Culture proposed a nationwide project entitled ‘meet a monk in a quiet corner’, which entailed plans to place monks in shopping malls, aimed at steering people – and young people in particular – away from ‘self-interested activities’ such as shopping, and towards consideration of religious values. The Thai Minister for Social Development was quoted in an on-line article posted on the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* website as saying: ‘We could campaign for religion in places where... teenagers gather’ (*Australian Broadcasting Corporation* 26/11/2005).

This proposed ‘meet a monk’ scheme can in turn be located within a broader national discourse known as Sufficiency Economy. This was formulated by the King of Thailand in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis, later codified within Thailand’s 2007 Human Development Report (THDR07), and is currently the guiding philosophy of the country’s tenth National Economic and Social Development Plan (see the Thai government public relations department website). Whilst Sufficiency Economy thinking promotes a range of values, including for example integrity, honesty, perseverance, toleration (sic), and wisdom, it places specific emphasis on *moderation* and *responsible consumption*, and is applicable at the individual as well as household, community and national levels (UNDP 2007, p.iii). Underpinning Sufficiency Economy thinking are the principles of Buddhism, explicitly cited in the THDR07 as the philosophical foundations of the Sufficiency Economy approach, although the report does note that these principles are ‘not exclusive to any religion or culture as the logic is built around simple concepts of man (sic) and the world’ (p.31). Of particular relevance here is Buddhism’s orientation towards the renunciation of worldly goods, or material things, and ultimately of the self; of ‘the troublesome and illusory “I”’ (Mills 1999, p.85).

Here is not the place to offer a detailed exploration of the principles of Theravada Buddhism and their implications for material wealth. For the purpose of this discussion it should be noted that it was in the context of the discourses sketched out here that the adult carer narrative of the self-centred teenager was produced, and

through them that young people were cast as bad. Of course this construction of young people is by no means specific to Thailand or its Buddhist orientation (although the form the construction takes varies in tone and texture from one context to another). Indeed it seems to have become something of a *sine qua non* of modern societies, a reflection of the way in which global economic transformations are producing similar patterns in young people's lives, albeit in ways that are experienced and manifested locally.

At the same time as being widely condemned in young people (as well as in parents), lifestyles of materialism and consumerism are heavily endorsed and widely sought after in the contemporary Thai context. The media and advertising industries in Thailand have grown enormously over the last few decades, increasingly promoting goods and services associated with consumer lifestyles, as Thailand has moved away from its agrarian roots and towards 'a new "middle class" lifestyle based on the growth of consumer capitalism' (Ockey 1999, p.241). As Mills notes in her piece on modernity and marginality in contemporary Thailand:

Thailand's very sophisticated modes of popular cultural production (especially television and print media) celebrate images of commodified display, material success and technological achievement. Elite and intellectual discourse is often preoccupied with questions about the moral value of these processes, especially with the dangers and/or benefits of rising urban consumer culture... However, for most people both in urban and rural communities, pervasive imagery of 'up-to-date' or modern Thai society represents standards of wealth and comfort that are eminently desirable. The glamor and prestige associated with the consumption-oriented lifestyles, the luxuries and conveniences located in the 'up-to-date' city is a powerful theme in popular Thai culture.

(Mills 1999, p.34)

Khlong Toey slum is located in the heart of the inner city, in close proximity to Bangkok's business and shopping districts and within easy reach of all of the city's main transport links, where the advertisement of consumer goods and services is prolific. Further, most of the young slum dwellers in this research had television sets at home or access to them at friends' houses, and all had potential access to the internet at local internet shops, where the promotion of consumer lifestyles is extensive. In this context, participants were required to be 'responsible consumers', to renounce worldly goods and to replace consumption with religion, and yet the very logic of the economic system in which they were located requires their consumption, indeed is dependent upon it.

Sexy youth

Young people also spoke of their body work and consumption practices in terms of being *sexy*, and in this sense clothes were particularly important, especially the hip-hop inspired fashion which enjoyed a considerable following in the slum during fieldwork. For young women this entailed wearing ostentatious jewellery, sleeveless tops, mini skirts, high-heeled shoes and heavy make up. For young men it entailed wearing very baggy, very low-cut jeans, t-shirts that had been modified by cutting the fabric at the sleeves and neck, chunky neck chains, sunglasses, caps and trainers. For some ('metrosexual') young men it also entailed wearing make up. For the regulars at the gym being sexy also entailed wearing as little as possible, at least during designated work-out times.

Young people frequently cited the items of clothing listed above amongst their favourite material objects, and referred to the importance of being *sexy* in their explanations of why these items were important to them. '*Oooh sexy*' was a common way of praising a friend or acquaintance just as '*mai sexy*' (not sexy) was a way of indicating that someone (usually me) had not made enough effort to make themselves sexually appealing.

Forms of movement and embodiment were also key ways in which young people attempted to emphasise their sexuality. For young women this included wiggling their hips from side to side as they walked, standing with their chests and bottoms sticking out and pouting their lips, whilst for young men it included walking with a swagger, their shoulders hunched forward and arms swinging in front of them from side to side. Again, the physical body and forms of embodiment took centre stage in the tactics used by young slum dwellers to construct themselves in a particular way. However, as young people, and especially young women, attempted to make themselves *sexy* through wearing certain items of clothing and habituating their bodies in certain ways, they fuelled perceptions of themselves as *sexually depraved*. The following excerpt is taken from the mother of two teenage girls, and is typical in its denunciation of young women's clothing:

When my mother raised me she did it in the old fashioned way, the same style as people in King Rama V period [laughing]. But now western culture has come. Nowadays the clothes they wear, they are so small, like wearing underwear. It's changed so much, so quickly... We always wore *patung*²² when I was young and I still wear it now. My mother wore *patung* too. But look at the way they dress today, such tiny clothes, spaghetti tops and short skirts. I can't accept this. They are very *bor-bor* [pornographic].

Van Esterik (1999) discusses the privileging of the body as a site of meaning in Thai society and notes that the 'body's appearance is critically important in interaction' because it is taken to reflect people's 'inner states' (Van Esterisk 1999, p.282). In the process of striving to construct themselves as *sexy* through their sartorial and embodied practices, young women challenged expectations of female sexual modesty, thereby lending support to the notion that their inner states were marked by sexual indecency, that they were behaving immorally and posing a threat to the wider moral order.

²² A long, tube-shaped skirt made from cloth wrapped around the waist

The adult carer narrative on young women's sexual indecency, in particular relating to their sartorial practices, can be located within a broader national discourse which has reached an annual peak during Songkran²³ for the past few years. At the time of the 2003 Songkran celebrations the Thai government's Ministry of Culture attempted to establish a prohibition on young women wearing spaghetti strap tops:

The Culture Ministry will ban spaghetti-strap tank tops and hot pants in the upcoming Songkran celebrations - despite protests from young women. 'Wear a simple sarong', Culture Minister Uraiwan Thienthong said yesterday. Uraiwan will seek cooperation from major agencies to enforce the ban in all areas popular for Songkran water fights. 'Revealing clothes may induce sexual harassment,' she added.

(*The Nation* 29/03/2003).

Since 2003 in the run-up to each year's Songkran celebrations, spaghetti strap tops and the young women who wear them have been routinely condemned by public officials within the Ministry of Culture, a condemnation underpinned by the Thai cultural norm – echoed in various local manifestations throughout the world – of female sexual modesty. In Thailand young women are expected to be *riaproy*, which is variously translated as 'neat', 'orderly', 'polite' and 'modest', including in terms of sexuality. Whilst in theory *riaproy* is age and gender neutral, during fieldwork the concept was used almost exclusively in relation to young women²⁴, with reference to posture and movement as well as clothing. Being *riaproy* entailed a significant degree of bodily containment – a bowed head and limited movement of the hips and limbs, and clothes that conceal the body. Thaweesit (2004), in her study of Thai women's gendered and sexual subjectivities, refers to 'a set of ideological discourses concerning being a 'good' woman... that one should be virtuous, nurturing and monogamous' and she notes how 'Thai society emphasises women's faithfulness and endurance in married life' (Thaweesit 2004, p.207). Similarly, Vuttanont et. al.

²³ Thai New Year, which spans three days in April and is widely celebrated by young people through street parties and public water fights.

²⁴ Where it was used in relation to boys, it tended to be with reference to those under ten.

(2006), in their study of Thai teenagers' attitudes towards sex, note that in Thai society 'girls are required to be docile, submissive, modest, and disinterested (sic) in sex until marriage' (Vuttanont et. al. 2006, p.2069).

This cultural-moral norm and the related repudiation of female sexuality exist in a context where the economy promotes and benefits from the sexualisation of young women (and increasingly men). At its most subtle this sexualisation can be identified in the provocative images of women found in advertisements for a vast array of consumer products. At its starkest, the benefit of women's sexualisation to the economy can be seen in the official sanctioning of prostitution. Thailand, and Bangkok in particular, is commonly referred to as the sex capital of the world and its economy depends in part on women selling sex for money. Montgomery (2001) notes that:

In an extraordinary and widely quoted statement by the Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand in November 1980, the existence of the sex industry was justified and acknowledged as the main tourist attraction.

She goes on to cite Ennew (1986), quoting the Deputy Prime Minister:

I ask all govenors to consider the natural scenery in your provinces, with some forms of entertainment that some of you might consider disgusting and shameful because they are forms of sexual entertainment that attract tourists ... we must do this because we have to consider the jobs that will be created.

(Ennew 1986, cited by Montgomery 2001, p. 99)

Although this statement was made in 1980, and whilst prostitution has not since seen such explicit official backing, it remains prolific in Thailand, as does sex tourism and

the local demand that helps to sustain it and the revenue that accrues. As young women in slum communities struggle to negotiate contemporary, global and local sexualised notions of what it means to be young women and as the moral panic and condemnation surrounding their sexuality quickens, the economy simultaneously demands their sexualisation for revenue.

International youth

Young people also spoke of their body work and consumption practices in terms of being *kon inter* (international people). To truly *go inter* (go international) – to have direct experience of rich, western and south east Asian countries – carried enormous symbolic value for the young people in this research. However most of them could only dream of visiting or living in the places that they defined as the ‘international’ realm, so they aspired to align themselves with it in whatever ways they could. The very few who had travelled abroad were extremely proud of the achievement, held in exceptionally high regard by peers and were openly envied by the vast majority who had not had such experiences. When twenty two year old Mote won a trip to Singapore to participate in an international computer gaming competition (he dropped out of school at a young age to work, and became ‘addicted to computers’), he proudly declared at his celebration dinner ‘now I go *inter*’. One of the guests at the dinner, twenty two year old Yoot, told me later that evening that he was very, very jealous of Mote because in his eyes Mote was *kon inter jing* (a true international person). Yoot also confided that he was jealous of Ganya and Sim because they both had western partners at the time and spoke good English, indicating the presence of a hierarchy of experiences through which one could claim a more or less genuine international identity. When I spoke with Yoot some time after this dinner I probed the issue further and asked whether he thought he would ever become *kon inter* like his friends. He replied that he would not, but that he was ‘a little bit *inter*’ because he spent a lot of time on the internet listening to American and Japanese pop music.

For the vast majority of young slum dwellers truly *going inter* – travelling to or living in rich countries – was not an option. For a few, the identity of *kon inter* was

claimed through speaking English or having ‘international’ partners and these practices carried a definite kudos in the slum. However, most young slum dwellers, as in Yoot’s case, attempted to construct themselves as *kon inter* through on-line activities, through watching television programmes and listening to popular music from the west, Japan and Korea, through dressing in western and Japanese fashions, and for some by emanating the embodied practices – the postures, the walks and the dance moves – associated with hip-hop culture.

For the young people in this study, attempting to identify as *kon inter* was in part a means of distancing themselves from the parochialism thought to be characteristic of slum life, including by many slum residents themselves. Older slum dwellers often referred to themselves as having ‘no knowledge of the world’ and many would laugh at what they called their ignorance of what lay beyond the geographical borders of the slum communities in which they lived and worked. Some referred to themselves using the offensive adjective *ban nork*, variously translated as ‘uncivilised’ and ‘uneducated’. This self-deprecation mirrored a wider perception of slum residents as lacking in knowledge of the global sphere, knowledge that counts in contemporary times.

As previously discussed, during fieldwork I also undertook research with young people and their parents from wealthy families, and I lived for three months with one such family. Statements such as the following, by the wealthy mother of a teenage girl, were typical in their pity and their positioning of ‘Khleng Toey parents’ as unworldly:

I think the life is very hard for parents in Khleng Toey, they can’t teach their children like we do because they don’t have the same knowledge. At breakfast I can read *The Nation* with my daughter and teach her what is going on in the world, improve her in English at the same time. But in Khleng Toey I think no, these parents don’t have the knowledge like this.

By attempting to construct themselves as *kon inter* by virtue of their body work and consumption practices young people in the slum hoped to counter the perception that they had little or no knowledge of the wider world, to be free from the stigma of parochialism associated with slum living. The aspiration here was definitely *not* to forego their Thai identity; they were fiercely proud of being Thai (not least on account of not having been colonised) and often emphasised their Thainess in other contexts (discussed in the following chapter). Rather, they aspired to add an international dimension to their self-images. However, for most young slum dwellers being true international people was an elusive dream since they could only enter the international realm in virtual, or proxy ways. In addition they continued to be constructed by outsiders, and in some cases to construct themselves, as parochial. Further, in their attempts to construct themselves as *kon inter*, young people contributed to a widespread perception that they were *turning their backs on Thai culture*. For example, the following excerpt is taken from an interview with the mother of a seventeen year old daughter and a fifteen year old son, talking about some of the changes she had observed since she was young:

P M Teenagers around here are very far away from Thai culture nowadays, they are not Thai people any more

SM What are they?

P M They are *kon mai dee* [bad people], from *Pratet mai dee* [Badland]

The narrative of young people turning their backs on Thai culture found ample expression amongst adult carers in the slum, with western culture (*wattanatam farang*), usually held to account for enticing teenagers away from what were seen as their rightful cultural roots. In light of this young people were commonly referred to – negatively – as *farang*²⁵ *ki nok* (fake, inferior westerners) whose spurious western

²⁵ 'Farang' is the label given to white, Western people and as such a Thai person can never be a farang. To be *kon inter* is in theory accessible to anyone and not directly related to race, nationality and ethnicity in the way that *farang* is.

ways brought suffering in their wake. For example, in response to my question concerning differences and similarities in the lives of young people now and when he was young, Ganya's father stated that 'Thai kids, when they see something new from the west, they have to have that thing... It drives them and their parents to suffer, to argue and get into debt'. Many other adult carers were similar in their antipathy towards what they perceived and experienced as Western imperialism and young people's concomitant abandonment of Thai culture in favour of the trappings of a western lifestyle. Interestingly, this perception was not mirrored by the adult carers of wealthy young people, who instead made it a priority to accompany their children into the international sphere, in particular through international travel and education. They recognised that this was necessary if their children were to be successful.

The perception of youth abandoning their cultural heritage can be located within a broader discourse concerning the deleterious effects of globalisation on 'Thai culture' and 'Thai values', which in turn speaks of a profound anxiety concerning the moral order and the role of young people (and parents) in threatening this. The newspaper *The Nation* was replete with headlines such as 'Morality losing ground'²⁶, 'Councillor slams "immoral generation"'²⁷ and 'Thais increasingly dissolute'²⁸, and these were followed by articles about how, for example, young people 'have not been steeped in traditional Thai values'²⁹, and about how the 'values, attitudes and behaviour of many Thai teens [are] in crisis because of excessive western influences'³⁰. By attempting to *go inter* and claiming identities as *kon inter* in the ways available to them (ways that are very different from those favoured by 'respectable' wealthier classes), the young people in this research fed into the perception that they were abandoning their cultural heritage and thereby leading the country into a moral abyss.

²⁶ *The Nation* 30/06/2005

²⁷ *The Nation* 20/08/2005

²⁸ *The Nation* 31/08/2005

²⁹ *The Nation* 20/08/2005

³⁰ *The Nation* 26/09/2004

Young slum dwellers' attempts to construct themselves as *kon inter* and the moral panic associated with this exist in a context where government policy, promoted by multilateral financial institutions, has prized the Thai economy ever further open in recent decades to international trade and opened its doors ever wider to international capital, where macroeconomic policy has 'incorporated Thailand... firmly within a global economy' (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005, p.199), and where the labour of the urban poor has facilitated this incorporation. Indeed, this openness has been a defining feature of Thai domestic and foreign policy since the reigns of King Mongkut and his successor King Chulalongkorn in the nineteenth century. In this sense Thailand, or at least the Thai economy, represents the epitome of *going inter* writ large. Such a process is legitimated, indeed required at the level of national policy, has been one of the key features of the country's economic transformation and remains one of the defining characteristics of its present economic orientation. And yet the young people in this research were condemned in their attempts to align themselves with the international sphere.

Modern youth

Young people spoke of their bodywork and consumption practices in terms of being 'modern' (*samai mai*) or 'developed' (*pattana leow*). Indeed this can be understood to encompass attempts to be *high-so*, *sexy* and *international*. The following excerpt from a discussion with fifteen year old Naen on the subject of her mobile phone indicates something of the function of this object in constructing the self as a modern, 'developed' subject:

The world has changed, we shouldn't sink back down to the world of nothing. Everyone in the world has mobile phones now and it's good to keep up. In the past, in my mum's time, they didn't have mobile phones because in the past Thailand wasn't developed. But we are developed now. We live in the modern world.

Mobile phones were prevalent amongst young people in the slum, and whilst not all shared Naen's ability to reflect on the broader socio-economic context of their possession, they clearly understood that mobile phones functioned to signify their participation in the modern world, that they were *the* critical contemporary accessory, a highly condensed symbol of status, popularity and modern identity. The following excerpt is taken from a discussion with fifteen year old Perapon, on the topic of the material objects most important to him:

P The mobile phone is most important. Without the mobile phone I am not quite the same as others

SM Which others?

P Everyone. Everyone has mobile phones nowadays

The phrases *bat joo ban* (nowadays) and *samai mai* (the modern era) were prominent in participants' discussions, for young people in explanations of why certain things were important to them and for elders in their narratives of despair at what they spoke of as negative qualities in the young generation. So strong was the desire to identify as modern that young people went to considerable lengths to do so. Experiences of theft were common during fieldwork, with expensive items such as digital cameras, mobile phones and MP3 players frequently going missing, with friends or siblings being suspected of taking them, and with cycles of confrontation, denial and acrimony ensuing. Committing oneself to debt to friends and family or through hire-purchase schemes, spending large proportions of one's income, saving considerable amounts of money for desired items and going without basic necessities were all common practices in the drive to be modern. For example one young man, Gop, reported working everyday throughout the summer holidays as a waiter in order to save ten thousand baht – almost three times his mother's monthly income – to buy the latest model of a mobile phone. The members of *Bodyfit* frequently went without dinner, or picked at the lunch leftovers in the NGO canteen, so that they had enough money to spend at the internet café later in the evening.

For young slum dwellers the eagerness to construct themselves as *kon samai mai* (modern people) was particularly significant as they were children or grandchildren of rural farming families whose poverty once pushed them off their paddy fields and into low status manual labour in Bangkok's then burgeoning industrial sector, and whose 'old fashioned lives' (*cheewit samai gorn*), or elements of it, had followed them deep into the underbelly of the inner city and continued to inform the logic of everyday slum life. Comparisons of slum living with village life abounded throughout fieldwork, with older generations frequently referring to themselves as rural, old-fashioned people, pointing to how they ate rice every day, listened to *look toong* and *mor lam* (Thai country music), dressed in *patung*, chewed *maag* and were uneducated. Young people understood that because of this connection between slum and rural, 'old-fashioned' life they were seen by many as inferior. The following excerpt is taken from a discussion with seventeen year old Arun, in which I asked if he had a favourite song at the time:

Right now I like a song called *Jiem Doa* [to feel that you are not good enough for somebody]. It describes my situation. I like a girl but I am not good enough for her. Sometimes if I see her I sing a song for her, one that I made up. 'I am not that good, I'm from a poor family, my family is from the countryside. But I really hope that you accept me. I will try and change for you'.

Approaches towards rural people in Thailand are complex and contradictory. In a certain sense they are idealised and romanticised, celebrated in the popular imagination as the traditional, hard-working, rice-yielding 'backbone of the country', representing the vestiges of a happy and idyllic past, imagined though this may be (Montgomery 2001, p.131). However, negative representations of rural people prevail, in particular of those from the Isan region where many of the participants' families originated. They were impersonated as clumsy buffoons in popular television shows and were derided, and derided themselves, for being 'old fashioned' and 'as stupid as the buffaloes'. Young participants in the slum were well aware of their rural heritage and its association with backwardness and 'old fashioned ways',

and of how this functioned to cast them as inferior, and they worked hard to distance themselves from the disrepute this brought. However, as the above discussion demonstrates, the dream of being modern youth was largely beyond reach, with young slum dwellers forced to operate at the superficial level of appearances whose illusory nature was all too quickly exposed.

For adult carers in the slum the modern era entailed two paths; the ‘right’ one and the ‘wrong’ one. According to them the young people in their charge and in their neighbourhoods were walking on the wrong one. The right path entailed supporting one’s family and making use of the positive opportunities offered by the ‘new civilisation’ to obtain a good education in order to get a well paid, high-status job. The wrong path entailed, amongst other things, an orientation towards self-interest, manifested in particular through unsustainable practices of conspicuous consumption, increasing sexual depravity and the abandonment of Thai culture and values, all of which signalled a lack of consideration for the family and a threat to the wider moral order. Although young slum dwellers were also strongly oriented towards the ‘right path’ as defined by adult carers, i.e. wanting to support their families, get educated, find decent jobs and improve their material standards of living, this was often downplayed or conveniently forgotten altogether, leaving the narrative of the ‘bad teenager’ to circulate unfettered and dominate local discourse.

So far discussion has focussed on two of the selected key practices of the teenage life – body work and consumption – and the prominent meanings attached to these, as well as some of their outcomes for young people. The third element of the teenage life selected for exploration in this chapter is going out. Discussion now turns to two prominent meanings that young people attached to this practice and to the consequences of their endeavours in this sphere.

Youth on display

Young people spoke of going out notably in terms of being seen. The evening described in the opening vignette, and the countless others I witnessed, were marked not only by a deep concern for appearances but by a strong impetus to display these to others and attract positive recognition in return. Arun verbalised this succinctly one evening at the gym. He was looking despondent, and when Ganya and I asked him what was wrong he replied that he was feeling low because no-one was taking any notice of him. He went on to say ‘all I want is for people to notice me’. He said he was disappointed because his efforts to look good were having ‘no results’ and when I asked him what a result would look like he said ‘people would notice me, appreciate my style’. He spoke of how much he was looking forward to the upcoming Strong Man competition (which was to be held in an exhibition centre on the outskirts of Bangkok) because there he imagined he would find a captive audience for the display of his self-image. He proceeded to describe in detail what he thought he might wear, and to show us photographs he had taken on his mobile phone, of himself posing in different outfits, asking us which one we thought would look best. On another occasion Arun and the other *Bodyfit* members asked Ganya and me if they could accompany us to an English class we were teaching, and despite their professed desire to learn they managed to turn the entire lesson into a fashion show, parading up and down the classroom in their hip-hop outfits, adding one accessory after another and nipping out to the toilets every now and then to spruce themselves up.

For other young participants in this research, displaying the images they put so much effort into creating, was also of utmost importance. When they were out their branded mobile phones, MP3 players and digital cameras – owned, given, borrowed or stolen – were always on display, regardless of whether they were using them and often regardless of whether or not they actually worked. Fleeting comments and detailed discussions of these and other products, especially branded clothing, formed significant features in the verbal landscape of their social interaction, and they clearly delighted in any positive attention given to the appearances they forged. The very few who spoke English made a deliberate point of doing so – loudly and

emphatically – when they were out. Carefully-crafted postures and well-practised movements were given ample expression on the streets and in the cafés and bars of the slum and outside, and explicit displays of affection amongst peers were common, with young people often seen holding hands, linking arms and play-fighting in public places. All of these practices spoke of a keen desire to be seen and appreciated by other young people.

Going out was also a means of trying to augment the modern image one had worked so hard to fashion. Whenever Ganya, her friends and I went out to a new nightclub, bar or restaurant, and when we visited the newly-opened Siam Paragon (a five-storey shopping mall replete with designer shops and bedecked with courtyard fountains, twinkling lights and hundreds of square metres of immaculate glass walls), they spoke of their excitement at being somewhere so *high-so* and how it made them feel *piset* (special), as if being in these places meant that they might soak up some of the high status associated with them.

However, as indicated earlier in this chapter, displaying and attempting to augment one's image made for a very precarious balancing act. Young people from the slum quickly assumed an inferior status once they traversed its geographical boundaries, as seventeen year old Som discovered when he attended the wedding of an ex-girlfriend (with whom he had broken up because he was not rich enough):

An and her new boyfriend got married a couple of months ago and I went to the wedding. It was in the Dusit Thani hotel. But I only stayed for an hour because everyone was wearing suits and ties and I was only wearing a T shirt. I like that T shirt, it looks *bling-bling* to me but they all had suits on. I don't have a suit. I tried to look smart but I am not like them. They looked down on me.

After recounting this experience Som went on to say, self-mockingly, that he was ‘just a *dek slum*’ and when I asked what he meant, he replied ‘well maybe we’re not supposed to go to those *high-so* places’. At this point Ganya interjected to say that she went to *high so* places and that she thought anyone should be able to if they wanted to, no matter where they were from or how much money they had. To this, Som replied that Ganya was different, she had a high education and spoke English and had friends like me. Som’s experience and the way in which he decoded it reveals how he had internalised the social hierarchy and had a strong sense of his own place within it, blaming himself for contravening the rules of that hierarchy when his self-styled modern image did not make the grade.

In their attempts to negotiate the minefield of status construction and display their images as modern youth, producing their bodies for consumption by others, young people in the slum (and in particular young women) fuelled a perception that they were *transgressing the cultural norm of passivity*, promoted in Thai society as an ‘ultimate virtue’ (Montgomery 2001, p.111). Narratives such as the following, by the mother of a teenage girl, were common:

Today teenagers like to show off. In my time it was not like this, it was forbidden, we had to keep ourselves quiet and private, not show our feelings, but teenagers today they don’t do this. They show off everything, they think this is normal, but I am from the old days so I think it’s not good. If you ask me they are too arrogant.

Linked to the perception that by displaying themselves so explicitly young people were demonstrating an unprecedented arrogance, many adult carers interpreted young people’s practices of display as a symbol of disrespect to elders, which in turn was taken as an affront to the system of seniority – one of the most fundamental organising principles of Thai society. For example, in her interview, the mother of three young women commented that:

In the past we really respected adults, we used to hide ourselves from them, try not to bother them. When we had to walk past an adult we bent our backs and apologised, made ourselves lower than them. I remember I used to be scared of adults, I wanted to disappear if I saw them! Now teenagers are not afraid like this, they don't try and hide themselves like we did. They want to show themselves, show themselves to everyone. Nowadays they are so arrogant. For me this is not respectful, they don't respect the adults any more. It seems like the adults are supposed to respect them nowadays.

Commentary criticising the display of the self tended to be aimed at young women. These practices of display were derided by adult carers for reflecting a shift away from hiding the self or adjusting it to seniors and towards brandishing the self, and for thereby challenging certain age-related norms of personhood. And yet this display is precisely what is required of young people in a socio-economic context which increasingly promotes, and is increasingly dependent upon, *conspicuous* consumption.

Addicted to friends

Young people also spoke of going out as a way of spending time with friends, and for young women in particular this was coupled with attempts to free themselves from experiences of servitude and violence at home within the family. The following excerpt is taken from a life history interview with twenty two year old Sim:

At home there were too many people and too many problems. And my aunty wanted me to be like a servant in the house, 'why don't you clean, wash the dishes, sweep the floor? Do the housework', like that. She hit me when I didn't do the things she wanted. So you know I started hanging out with my close friend, she took me away from the problems at home. This was when I

was about fifteen. We went out all the time, hanging out together. We enjoyed hanging out together more than being at home.

For Sim and the many others who echoed her desire to escape from negative experiences at home, friendships were seen in part as a sanctuary (although as we will see below, they also functioned in much more complex ways). Young people spoke of the different worlds created and inhabited by them and their friends as opposed to the world of parents, which was often experienced as oppressive. Going out was one of the major ways in which young people found refuge in their friendships.

However, by spending so much time with friends young people contributed to a narrative concerning a new and dangerous addiction. From early on in fieldwork the phrase *dit puan* (to be addicted to friends) arose as a stock feature in adult carer interviews and everyday conversations about young people. This can be understood as a way of signalling disapproval of the latter's (and in particular young women's) practical and emotional attachment to selected peers and assumed neglect of the family and duties towards it. The following quote is taken from an interview with the mother of three young women:

Kids today don't see the importance of family occasions like we did in the past. Mother's day is supposed to be when children spend time with their mother and pay respect but now when we have public holidays all they do is go out with their friends... The value of these public holidays has changed. In my day it was a time to spend with your family but nowadays children see it as time to hang out with their friends. They should call it friend's day. They are too addicted to their friends.

What was portrayed by adult carers in relatively simple terms as a new and threatening process whereby young people were forsaking their duty to the family in

favour of friends and fun, was experienced by young people in much more ambivalent ways. On the one hand young slum dwellers saw their friends as sources of support in both material and emotional terms, turning to them for money, food, shelter, comfort, advice and a non-judgemental ear, and as crucial elements in the audience for one's carefully constructed image. On the other hand friends often made precarious and fragile support mechanisms; they too were poor, had unstable home lives and were equally caught up in the struggle to compete for social status. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with seventeen year old Jim, one of the members of *Bodyfit*:

Now I'm going to talk about Som. Actually there is something I don't like about him. He acts differently when there are girls around. I know it's natural for boys to pose when girls are around. I do that, too. But Som always poses by burning his friends, especially me, in front of girls. Once we met a group of girls and he hit me on the head and told them that I'm stupid. He called me a buffalo in front of them. Maybe I am not as clever as him. Maybe I won't be as successful as him... still I think he should respect me.

In a context where status, image and appearance were highly valued and where slum dwellers were alternately pitied and derided, young people struggled fiercely to carve out positive identities in part by competing with their friends for recognition. Whilst adult carers bemoaned (and simplified) young people's alignment with their friends and through it constructed young people as bad, this alignment is increasingly useful to the consumer market, as the latter extends its reach into this sphere of young people's lives, including and perhaps intensifying its competitive aspects: profit-seeking marketers now seek and gain 'unprecedented access to children's social worlds through widespread 'peer-to-peer' (i.e., child-to-child) marketing' (Schor 2008, p.486).

In addition to weakening their moral status, the young slum dwellers in this research also undermined their own material advancement through their engagement in the

teenage life. Time and money spent with friends, hanging out, fashioning the right bodies and consuming the right products was time and money detracted from studying and saving. The following is a particularly potent example of this, but serves nonetheless to illustrate a commonly felt tension between the present-day orientation towards the teenage life and future material advancement.

Ning was seventeen years old when I met her and lived with her two younger brothers and her aunt and uncle in a small wooden hut in one of Khlong Toey's peripheral communities. Her parents lived nearby but worked such long hours (her mother as a casual labourer and her father as a taxi driver) that they decided to leave their children in the care of relatives. Ning dropped out of school when she was fifteen because the family was experiencing such financial difficulties that they could not afford to pay the hidden costs involved in her education (such as the cost of uniforms, study materials and trips out). For a couple of years after leaving school Ning helped out on her aunt's food stall and whilst doing this met a member of staff who worked at a slum based NGO. As their acquaintance grew, this man came to recognise Ning's linguistic abilities and persuaded her to apply for a scholarship to complete her upper secondary education with a view to applying for an assisted place on an International Baccalaureate scheme abroad. Ning's application was successful and when I met her she was studying for her upper secondary exams and enrolled on an intensive English course at the NGO to prepare for studying abroad. Her interview revealed something of her struggle to manage the tension between living the teenage life and future material advancement:

It's hard for me to manage my time. I love to have fun and hang around with my friends, it's so hard for me to put everything in the schedule and I always mess up. I want to study, I want to be good at English so I can go to study abroad but nowadays I always seem to spend time with my friends. I don't know why, because I know when I'm with them I'm not studying. Right now I am so stressed because I cannot catch up with all the learning. I know this is not good, I feel like I should manage my time better, spend more time studying. Actually I feel very confused about what I should do. When my

friends call me, when I know they are hanging out together I just want to be with them. We usually go out, hang around together, just hang around in the shopping mall, eating together, buying things, this and that. But I know that studying is more important so that I can go abroad and get a good job and have a good life when I am older.

In the end Ning's participation in the teenage life severely undermined her dreams of future material advancement. Through continued post-fieldwork correspondence via a mutual friend, I learned that leading up to her exams Ning became more and more involved with her group of friends and less oriented towards her studies. She did not turn up to one of her English exams, and although she was allowed to sit it later on, she did not do very well. Despite this, the NGO appealed on her behalf and she was offered a place at an international college in Singapore. However, on her return trip to Bangkok during a college vacation Ning became pregnant and dropped out of school again. Whilst Ning's case may be unusual in its detail it illustrates well the way in which young participants, through the lure of the teenage life, can undermine their own chances of improving their material standards of living.

Whilst the practices of the teenage life discussed in this chapter and the meanings that young people attached to them speak of a sense of agency amongst young slum dwellers, they gave rise to a strong sense of disorder amongst adult carers. Amongst the more poetically inclined, metaphors abounded in the attempt to capture this feeling, with evocations of a 'tragic gap' having emerged between young people and older generations in the wake of the 'new civilisation', the disappearance of 'borders' that once kept young people (and especially young women) close to their families, and the uncomfortable co-existence of 'different worlds' or 'different eras'. The father of one young woman spoke of the difficulty he had following his daughter in the 'new world':

The world is spinning everyday and I see my daughter has jumped on it. I stand still whilst it goes past and leaves me behind. The young people move

with the new world and the parents stand still watching it spin... It's hard for me to follow her in the new world. The new generation is in the new world. It is hard for the parents.

Amongst wealthy parents I observed nothing like the sense of generational disjuncture or lack of control expressed by adult carers in the slum. On the contrary, whilst anxiety about their children's vulnerability in contemporary times was considerable, so too was the control they exerted over their children, as was their experience of the world their children inhabited. Wealthy parents escorted their children almost everywhere, except into the classroom, and if this was not possible they instructed older siblings or domestic servants to do so, and they chose and monitored their children's after school, on-line, weekend and holiday activities closely. To a degree they controlled their children's choice of friends by selecting schools attended by people 'like them', and they complained at the highest level if too many children from families who were not like them (such as those living in slum communities) encroached on what they saw as *their* children's territory. Perceived risks were dealt with by wealthy parents through this exertion of control, control that only money could buy. This did not go uncontested by their children (for example through arguments over the degree to which they were given freedom to travel on their own), but nonetheless seemed to be all-encompassing and bound parents and their children closely together in particular ways.

Related to this, whilst wealthy young people were also objects of the wider pejorative discourses concerning Thailand's moral decay (as indeed were parents), and whilst their market saturation was evident in their consumption and related practices thus aligning them in certain ways to their poorer counterparts, for them being teenagers did not invite the same degree of moral questioning from elders. First, as noted above, their elders were themselves living high-so, international, modern lives and did not require their children's assistance in the ways that adult carers in the slum did. Wealthy young people's practices were underpinned by the financial resources necessary to make being modern subjects a material reality (a relatively unthreatening one) and not just a matter of shaky appearances. Second, for

wealthy young people, education (before school, during the school day, after school and at weekends) was by far the dominant practice in their lives and one that was widely legitimated.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed what was known amongst research participants in the slum as *cheewit wairoon*, or the teenage life. It has explored some of the prominent ways in which young slum dwellers attempt to construct themselves as modern youth, the outcomes of their endeavours, and some of the unintended side effects that ensue.

It has demonstrated that the teenage life, and in particular all that this entails in terms of actively constructing modern identities through commodity consumption and display, is a central feature of young slum dwellers' aspirations; something which they are positively geared towards and something which forms a fundamental orienting principle in their everyday life-worlds. In this, discussion has also shown how these marginalised young people, far from resisting the dominant culture, are struggling desperately to define themselves in its terms and be accepted on its grounds. Here, the exercise of agency – something that emerges with force from young people's practices and their framings of them – is strongly geared towards participating in the conventions of consumer capitalism; towards doing precisely what is demanded of them by market structures.

However, discussion has pointed to how, even when young slum dwellers endeavour to construct themselves as acceptable modern subjects, the dream remains elusive. They enter the game on such disadvantaged terms that they must operate at the level of appearances, without the material resources necessary to substantiate their identity claims. Further, once those carefully constructed appearances are transported outside the slum they are, and can only ever be, pale approximations of the real thing.

Moreover, this chapter has shown how young slum dwellers, in attempting to enhance their socio-economic status, weaken their moral status. By attempting to elevate their socio-economic positioning through practices of unsustainable consumption and distance themselves from the image of poverty associated with slum living, young participants (and especially young women) unwittingly reinforce their positioning as self-centred, materialistic teenagers. By augmenting and expressing their sexuality, young people (mostly young women) inadvertently shore up their positioning as sexually depraved. By attempting to identify as global subjects and refuting the parochialism associated with slum life, young slum dwellers unwittingly lend support to others' constructions of them as cultural defectors. By trying to construct themselves as modern youth in the only ways available to them and resisting the backwardness associated with slum life, young slum dwellers are cast as knowingly walking the wrong path offered by the modern era. By displaying their modern selves (and thereby challenging the interconnected norms of passivity and seniority) they further contribute to their positioning as arrogant and disrespectful of seniority. By identifying with friends (and for many young women rejecting negative experiences at home), young people (specifically young women) once again contribute to the doubt cast on their moral status, as their alignment with friends is taken to signify an abandonment of the family.

This chapter has also shown how young people's engagement in the teenage life can function to undermine their efforts towards future material advancement: resources made available for participating in 'modern' youth lifestyles mean resources made unavailable for studying and saving.

As was noted throughout this chapter, participants were widely condemned by virtue of their attempted engagement in the practices discussed here and yet this engagement is demanded of them by market forces, is 'eminently desirable' throughout Thailand (Mills 1999, p.34), and is a relatively uncontroversial reality for those with money. In this, marginalised youth living in urban poverty can be seen as fall guys for the tensions that arise from the national pursuit of consumer capitalism and the nation's incorporation into the global economy.

CHAPTER 5

DOING THE RIGHT THING: CONTRIBUTING TO THE FAMILY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the contributions that young slum dwellers make to their families. It begins with a vignette which details a day in the life of several young people, focusing on the various forms of assistance they provide for their families. Following the vignette is a discussion of the categories within which their practices can be understood and the key patterns associated with them. Discussion then turns to young people's understandings of and feelings about the contributions they made to their families, and points to certain consequences and side effects of their endeavours. The penultimate section explores the tension that exists between attempting to contribute to the family and live the teenage life (discussed in the previous chapter) and investigates the ways in which young people approach this tension, pointing where relevant to further unintended outcomes. The concluding section recaps on the chapter's main points and closes with some reflections on the wider implications of the arguments made.

The following vignette highlights selected contributory practices of eleven young people over the course of twenty four hours. I have chosen to present them in this way, rather than focussing on fewer participants over a longer period, or more participants at one given time, in order to strike a balance between portraying the breadth of support that young people give and conveying something of the depth of their experiences.

VIGNETTE

It is 4 a.m. and seventeen year old Jib gets up to begin her household chores. She sweeps the floor of the small wooden house where she lives with her parents, washes the dishes from the previous night's dinner under the communal soi tap, and fetches breakfast for herself and her parents from one of the nearby early morning food stalls. After eating breakfast her parents leave for work – her mother to clean offices and apartments and her father to deliver a consignment from the port to the north of Thailand. Jib gets dressed and cleans the breakfast dishes before she begins the washing, which she does by hand in a plastic bucket in the alleyway outside her house. She hangs the washing out to dry and at 7 a.m. leaves for school. Both of Jib's parents work long hours (between twelve and fourteen hours a day) and Jib has full responsibility for the household chores.

Half a mile away in another community, thirteen year old Gop gets up to help her grandmother run her coffee stall, which is open every morning between 4.30 a.m. and 7.30 a.m. She sets up a few tables and chairs outside the two-roomed concrete house where she lives with her grandmother, her mother and two brothers, takes customers' orders and collects their payments. The coffee stall is currently the main income-generating activity within Gop's household. Her grandfather, who used to live with them and earned money as a labourer in Khlong Toey market, died last year. Her father, who went to the Middle East as a construction worker when Gop was eleven, stopped sending money home a few months ago. Gop's mother is in poor health and only opens her food stall two days a week and has gambling debts, and her older brother does not work and is also indebted – to a friend from whom he stole a motorbike, raced it and crashed it without insurance. After Gop has helped to pack away at the end of the morning's service she leaves for school.

It is 8 a.m. and seventeen year old Jim travels back from Nana³¹ to the community where he is living temporarily. He has been running a friend's mother's make up stall since midnight and now makes his way back to her house on the bus. He picks up

³¹ One of Bangkok's main go-go bar districts.

breakfast for himself and his friend's father on the way, and after they have eaten Jim sets about sweeping floors, washing dishes and taking the household's dirty laundry to a neighbour who will wash it. When Jim returns he gets out the homework he has been set this week by a teacher at the community school where he has enrolled to study for his lower secondary qualifications. He studies for about half an hour, then falls asleep.

Meanwhile fifteen year old Jeeb leaves his house and makes his way to his friend's uncle's house, where he will spend the next few hours preparing fruit for mobile street vendors to sell. He earns around one thousand baht per week doing this work and gives half of it to his grandmother, with whom he lives along with his uncle and his uncle's second wife. Until recently Jeeb's father lived with them as well but a few months ago he and Jeeb's uncle had a fight and his father left and now lives with one of his girlfriends nearby. Jeeb has worked since he left school at the age of twelve, earning money selling sweets and snacks around the community, re-cycling rubbish, fetching, carrying and delivering things for neighbourhood businesses, labouring at the port and labouring at a garden centre. Since his father left, Jeeb's financial assistance has increased as his father no longer contributes to the household income and his grandmother is struggling to repay debts as well as pay for ongoing household expenses.

At lunchtime twenty two year old Yoot arrives at his uncle's house for his shift preparing fruit. Yoot also earns around one thousand baht per week doing this work and gives some of the money to his older sister, whom he considers to have been his main carer since he was two. Yoot left school when he was eleven and since then has worked doing a host of informal jobs around the community much like Jeeb, and has always given a proportion of his earnings to his older sister.

It is mid afternoon and thirteen year old Dtae comes home from school, collects the toy lottery tickets that he plans to sell and heads off for the local market, where he works until 8 p.m. His income is not stable; he earns between one hundred and two

hundred and fifty baht a week, but he always gives one hundred baht to his mother each week. Dtae's mother used to save this money but now uses it for everyday household expenses along with the money she earns from her mobile food stall, since Dtae's father, previously a labourer at the port, broke his leg whilst inebriated and cannot work.

As market trading gets into full swing the community gym opens and twenty two year old Ganya helps the volunteer instructors set out the rusty weight lifting equipment. She warms up and begins working out but stops when she sees her father standing at the gate gesturing to her. She collects her purse from the keep safe cupboard, goes to her father and when he asks her for money to buy his dinner she gives him fifty baht. She returns to her work out but leaves early, at 7 p.m., because today payment is due on the room she rents for herself and her father, and she has to catch the landlord to give him the money before he leaves.

Opposite the house where Ganya rents her room fifteen year old Bew stands at a water dispensing machine with Loi, her five year old informally adopted brother. Loi stands on tiptoes to feed one baht coins into the slot, and they fill up several bottles and carry them home to the three-room concrete house where they live with Bew's parents and older brother. Loi used to sleep in the street outside Bew's house, after his father was sent to prison for drug dealing, his mother was unable to care for him due to her own drug addiction, and no-one else in his large, extended family would take him in. After three months Bew's parents decided to take Loi in, but they work long hours running their food stall downtown and it is Bew who looks after him. On the way home Bew stops to buy dinner for herself and Loi and eats with him on a sheet of plastic in the living area of the house. When they have finished she washes him, helps him change into his pyjamas and puts him to bed in the room they share with Bew's mother. Bew then sits down to do her homework but gets up frequently to reassure Loi, who cries out in his sleep.

As Bew comforts Loi in his fitful sleep, thirteen year old Bort is helping his step-father into bed. He has already washed him down in the communal bathroom at the end of the alleyway where they live in a two room wooden house (with Bort's mother, maternal grandparents, two brothers, uncle and three cousins) and escorted him home. He has changed his step-father's clothes and tried to make him eat something without success, and now switches on the fan to keep the mosquitoes away from his step-father as he sleeps. Bort sets about clearing up the mess made when his father came home drunk that afternoon and fought with his mother. He sweeps up the pieces of broken bottle, rearranges the clothes rack and reassembles the pile of newspapers that sit waiting to be taken to the recycling centre in exchange for cash. Bort then goes out to look for his mother and check she is ok, and finds her at a neighbour's house in the middle of a gambling session.

As Bort heads home, fifteen year old Naen sets out to join her mother and father at their street cafe on the main road. Naen has been at school all day, after which she attended the community gym for an hour, did her DJing slot at the community radio station, ate dinner at her aunt's food stall, and went home to relax for a while before starting work. As soon as she arrives at her parent's street cafe she washes up a pile of plates and side-steps a swaying middle-aged couple singing karaoke in front of the television, to clean the tables. She restocks the condiments, does the next load of washing up and takes orders whilst her father has a break. At around midnight Naen takes off her apron, has something to eat then walks home to the flats where she lives with her parents, who will join her in a couple of hours when they have closed up for the night.

It is now the early hours of the morning and thirteen year old Deuy gets up to help her great aunt go to the toilet, which is located in the corner of the room where they sleep, cordoned off with blankets attached to wooden poles (Deuy's great aunt was recently run over and broke her leg so cannot walk easily). Deuy waits for her to finish then escorts her back to the thin foam mattress where she sleeps, alongside Deuy, Deuy's brother, uncle and three younger cousins. Boom, Deuy's four year old youngest cousin, wakes up and also needs to go to the toilet and Deuy gets up to

escort him too. Deuy has lived here for a year, ever since her mother and aunt were sent to prison for drug dealing and illegal possession of firearms and her father disappeared, and since then she has become the main carer for her great aunt and cousins. Neither Deuy nor her cousins go to school and Deuy spends her days looking after her cousins, fetching food, washing clothes and running errands for her great aunt, and collecting rubbish for recycling.

KEY PRACTICES

The practices of contribution evident in this vignette can be understood in terms of three main categories: financial provision, care work and domestic work. Whilst the sections of the above vignette focused mainly on one form of assistance for each young person, most young people were engaged in multiple forms. The following table provides figures concerning the numbers of young people in this research who engaged in particular forms of contribution, and the subsequent discussion expands on these figures.

Table 5. Numbers of young slum dwellers engaged in particular forms of contribution to the family.

Type of contribution	Direct financial support	Indirect financial support	Caring for resident elders	Caring for younger siblings	Domestic work
Numbers of young people	11 6 female 5 male	8 6 female 2 male	9 5 female 4 male	6 All female	18 14 female 4 male

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

Eleven of the young people in the core sample made direct financial contributions to their families. Six of these were female and five were male. These financial contributions varied between young people and for individual young people over time. Contributions can be regular or occur only at times of crisis or acute family hardship, they can be pro-actively offered by young people, given in response to

demands by adult carers or simply taken from young people's savings. In this research the main factors governing whether or not and the extent to which young people made direct financial contributions to their families were: the circumstances and related demands of their family, age and gender. The greater the financial difficulty experienced by the family the greater the contributions made by young people, the older the young person the greater their contribution tended to be, and young women's contributions tended to be of higher financial value and more regular whilst young men's tended to be lower in financial value (although perhaps higher in emotional value, as discussed later on), and more sporadic.

Eight of the young people who formed a core sample in this study made indirect financial contributions to their families by helping them with their work. Six of these were female and two were male. This form of assistance can be regular or occur only at times of crisis or acute family hardship, and it can be for a greater or smaller number of days each week and for a relatively large or small amount of time. The main factors governing whether or not and the extent to which young people helped their adult carers with their work were: the financial and health-related circumstances of the family, gender and whether or not the young people had their own jobs already. The greater the financial difficulty and the greater the health problems of adult family members, the more likely young people were to become involved in helping them with their work, if they did not work outside the home already. The majority of those who helped their adult carers with their work were those in the middle of the selected age range in this research, i.e. around fifteen years of age.

Twelve of the young slum dwellers in this research (six female and six male) had resident elders who were cared for. Of these twelve young people, nine (five female and four male) were directly involved in providing elements of this care. This particular form of contribution was gendered; for the boys in this research, caring for elders was ad-hoc and consisted mainly of looking after alcoholic fathers (or step-fathers) and protecting, or trying to protect, mothers from those fathers when they were violent. For the girls, caring for elders was an ongoing, daily undertaking and

consisted of assistance with daily ablutions, performing grooming activities, and fetching food and medicine.

Ten of the twenty eight young people who formed a core sample in this study (seven female and three male) had resident younger siblings³². Of the ten, six (all female) were involved in caring for those younger siblings. As well as being gendered, this care work was also determined by birth order and entailed washing, dressing, feeding, dropping off and collecting from school or nursery, helping with homework and providing activities or watching over them whilst they played with friends.

Eighteen of the twenty eight young people who formed a core sample performed domestic chores on a daily basis. Once again this assistance was gendered; fourteen young women and four young men performed domestic work. Domestic work consisted of cleaning, tidying, washing dishes, washing clothes or taking and collecting them from neighbourhood laundry services, filling water bottles and sweeping floors. For young women it tended to be performed daily for between one and four hours whereas for young men it tended to be undertaken much more sporadically and for shorter amounts of time.

MEANINGS AND CONSEQUENCES

Young people spoke of the contributions they made to their families and households as a means of making merit (*tam bun*) and repaying the debt of gratitude they owed their parents and carers (*bunkun*), as the following excerpts from young people's interviews indicate:

Sim I give [my mum] money because I think that she's getting old, yes, and I just want to pay her back for everything she did for me. I give her money about twice a month.

³² The term 'siblings' is used here to refer to brothers, sisters, adopted brothers and sisters, and cousins.

SM What did she do for you?

Sim She gave me the life. In Thai culture we believe that the kid should show their gratitude to the parents because they give you the life, yes... For children in my culture it is important to show the gratitude. So we help our parents in every way we can.

(Sim, twenty two year old young woman)

I want to obey dad and make him proud. I will try and make him so proud of me. It's good to help our parents... this way we can make them proud and show our gratitude.

(Bort, thirteen year old boy)

From these excerpts, illustrative of the way in which other young people also framed their contributions, it appears that such practices were the result of conscious, strategic choices whereby young people decided to repay the debt of gratitude they owed to their parents. However this filial debt and related obligations are part of a long standing cultural norm which has been a basic organising principle of Thai social relations for centuries and as such is written into a young person's life from the outset. It is so deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the context in which young participants were located that it would be extremely difficult for them to operate outside of its logic. Mulder (1990) observes that in Thai society children are taught the following:

Your mother loves you more than anybody else. She has given birth to you; you have eaten from her breast... She has been feeding you and caring for you. She knows what is best for you. You should return her love, be thankful to her, respect her, yet in all your life you will never be able to repay her for the overflowing goodness she has done for you... Never, never forget to return the goodness that she has given to you; be grateful and fulfil your filial obligation.

(Mulder 1990, p.64)

In this sense, contributing to one's family, fulfilling obligations and repaying the debt of gratitude are undertaken because this is what is required of young people within the structure of Thai norms and expectations, according to a dominant local-cultural script. Indeed references to Thai culture and expectations therein were common in young people's narratives, indicating an awareness of the moral-cultural parameters in which they operated and of the way in which cultural norms shape practice. Thus young people could be understood as knowingly upholding one of the most powerful structures in Thai society, one which is both enabling and constraining of everyday practice and related identities. However, as illustrated above, young people framed their contributions in terms of choice, thus emphasising their own sense of agency. What this points to, amongst other things, is the way in which young slum dwellers creatively draw on a long-standing cultural norm in constructing themselves as moral agents.

During a focus group discussion concerning young people's use of time, I asked participants to list all of the activities they had done the day before and then categorise those activities in their own terms and rank them in order of importance. The young people placed their practices of contribution in a category they labelled 'things we have to do', ranked them as the most important of their daily activities and emphasised their own decision-making in their undertaking:

Nam These are things we have to do such as housework, helping our parents work and looking after the younger ones.

SM Why have you ranked them as the most important?

Nam Well, we must do them for our parents. But I choose to do them too, no-one forces me. How I spend my time is up to me.

The other seven participants in this focus group, and other young people in their interviews, echoed Nam's insistence on having no-one force them to do anything, including performing their filial duties, and being the ultimate directors of their daily

lives. This emphasis on agency allows for the presentation of the self as in control and, importantly, through *choosing* to perform one's filial duties, functions to construct the self in a particular way. Presenting oneself as choosing to repay the debt of gratitude through contributing to the family was a means of constructing oneself as a *dek dee* (good child):

For mum I try to be a good son. This is very important. We help [our parents] at work and we follow what they tell us, not make them wait when they have asked us to do something. I want to make mum feel proud of me, like if I could get a job that pays a lot of money I could give it to mum.

(Jim, seventeen year old young man)

References linking their multiple contributions to the notion of being a good child were common in young people's narratives and can be understood as attempts to demonstrate their moral worth. However, the dream of being, and being seen as good children through contributing to the family, was rather elusive to the young slum dwellers in this study. Firstly none of them had the resources with which to contribute to their families to the extent that their families required. The combination of low income and high levels of indebtedness alongside the lack of adequate social security and the hidden costs of schooling made family requirements for money high. And yet by definition young people were ill-placed to provide the money required, since they were either at school and so could only work a limited number of hours in casual, low-paid jobs or had dropped out of school at an early age and therefore had low earning power.

Secondly, young slum dwellers' practices of contribution were overshadowed by the narrative of the unhelpful teenager, which circulated readily amongst adult carers in the slum. This narrative was closely connected with some of the discourses identified in the previous chapter, such as those claiming the selfishness and materialism of young people, their cultural defection to 'western ways', their arrogance, disrespect

of seniority and their preference for friends. The narrative of the unhelpful teenager, locatable within the national discourse that bemoans the immorality of youth, can be seen for example in the following interview excerpt:

Teenagers these days are lazy to help their parents. They spend all their time playing on the internet and hanging around. I had a hard life when I was young. I started working when I was thirteen, I worked in a battery factory and then I worked as a road digger making concrete roads and I gave all the money to my mum... Kids today don't work like this, they ask for money from their parents. Life is convenient for kids now, too convenient, they are too *sabai- sabai*³³. They don't work or help the family as we did in the past.

(Mother of a fifteen year old daughter)

The narrative of young people's contributions to the family being insufficient was a strong feature in adult carers' interviews and in everyday conversations. Commonly following the references to 'lazy' youth were evocations of times past, when young people worked long hours in gruelling conditions with few, if any, opportunities to go to school. As well as being closely linked to the discourses concerning young people identified in the previous chapter, the narrative of inadequate assistance can be located in the collective experience of low parental (or carer) income and high indebtedness outlined above, and in the collective history in the slum which has seen the introduction of state schools into slum areas, the national introduction of universal compulsory education (first up to the age of twelve, then up to the age of fifteen) and the official outlawing of child labour, all of which have placed a pressure on parents or carers to support young people for longer and a concomitant postponement of responsibility on the part of young people.

Adult carers' attitudes to the inadequate assistance from young people were not uniform; they varied significantly according to the gender of the young people in

³³ Various translated as 'happy', 'comfortable' and 'content'

question³⁴. There were three main positions regarding the perceived lack of contribution made by young men: *happiness* that they did anything at all, *relief* that whilst they may not have been ideal sons in terms of contributing to the family at least they were not engaged in illicit or harmful activities and *resignation* to what was seen as an inevitable and unchangeable state of affairs. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with P Kat, the mother of two young men. When I asked if her sons did anything to help her she replied:

P K When [the eldest son] gets paid 1,000 baht sometimes he gives me 100 baht. It's not very much.

SM How do you feel about that?

P K I'm happy. At least he gives me something. If he didn't give me any I would feel sad and ashamed. He is good to give me a little.

P Kat was a widow and lived with her two teenage sons and the two orphaned children of her third son who had died a year before I began fieldwork. When I met her, P Kat was in desperate need of money, to feed and clothe herself and her two grandchildren, to pay off the significant debts she had to local money lenders and to re-stock her grocery shop which sat empty because she could not afford the products to fill it. The amounts of money that her eldest son gave her, and the fact that his contributions were not regular, meant that his assistance did not go far in alleviating the difficulties that P Kat experienced, and yet she expressed happiness that he gave her anything at all.

One of the striking features of P Kat's narrative is her emphasis on how she would feel *ashamed* if her son did not give her anything. Rather than emphasise the poverty she experienced, the cost and difficulty of raising her orphaned grandchildren, or

³⁴ There is also a variation according to age, however this is between those within the sample age range and even younger children.

how more money from her sons might have gone some way towards making ends meet, she spoke of the imagined shame which a small contribution from her eldest son averted. This points to two issues of particular interest; first, the high symbolic value of young people's contributions in terms of maintaining, diminishing or augmenting adult carer status and second, the related burden this places on young people.

Other adult carers expressed relief that whilst their sons did not help them as much as they might have liked, at least they were not involved in drugs, and resignation that a lack of assistance was to be expected from sons. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with Ba³⁵ Dum, the mother of three young men. I asked if her sons gave her money or helped out in other ways and she replied:

B D [The youngest son] goes out and plays computer games all the time. If you ever need to find him he is in the internet shop. Nothing more than playing games. And driving around the neighbourhood on his motorbike. But it's very lucky for me that he isn't involved with drugs.

SM Would you like him to do more to help you?

B D He is a boy [laughing]. I think this is quite normal for boys, not just in my family but if you look around here it's the same for others.

Whilst Ba Dum did not express the shame that P Kat imagined she would feel if her son did not give her anything, she did emphasise the commonality of her experience, both in terms of her local neighbourhood and a wider gender stereotype. In this way she diminished the shame that accompanies having 'ungrateful', 'uncaring' or 'lazy' sons. Daughters on the other hand were much more heavily criticised when they were perceived as not contributing enough. The following quote is taken from an interview with P Noi, the mother of three young women:

³⁵ Thai for aunt

[My daughters] don't care too much about their mum, they hang out in the shopping mall with their friends... They care only about themselves, about what they can buy and their group. They don't care so much for their family, they don't help their parents any more. This is the new era.

This quote is typical of the degree of negativity expressed when referring to the perceived insufficiency of young women's contributions. Here again we can see an emphasis on the ubiquity of the experience, as P Noi contextualised her daughters' apparent ingratitude and lack of support with reference to a society-wide mood of the time.

Later in her interview P Noi went on to detail the amounts of money that her daughters contributed to the household income and how this had increased in the wake of their father's death a few months previously. The amounts were relatively substantial; the two daughters who worked (as waitresses in go-go bars) each gave four thousand baht a month to their mother, which she used to buy groceries for her food stall and for the daily expenses incurred by her youngest daughter in attending school. And yet P Noi still claimed that her daughters did not help her, as did other parents whose daughters contributed what seemed like relatively substantial amounts. Why was it that when P Kat, the mother of two young men quoted above, spoke of her son's ad-hoc contributions of one hundred baht she was happy yet when P Noi spoke of her daughters' regular joint contributions of eight thousand baht she claimed that this meant they did not care about her? Expectations of young people in terms of the work they did in support of their families were highly gendered; whilst the level of support expected from young women was high, that expected of young men was relatively low. Further, expectations of the kind of assistance provided was gendered; the ultimate way in which a young Thai man is expected to provide for his family is spiritually, through entry into the monkhood, whilst the duty to provide materially falls to a significant degree to young women. Here also, the lower status

of young women arguably makes it easier to criticise their practices compared to young men's.

In addition to being ill-placed to meet their families' financial needs and having their contributions overshadowed by the narrative of the uncaring child, young slum dwellers' attempts to augment their moral status carried other, unintended outcomes. In the process of constructing themselves as good children in the particular ways available to them – by working in badly paid, low status jobs to provide money for the family and by undertaking care work and domestic work for the family at home – young participants unwittingly reinforced their low socio-economic status, their positioning as *dek slum* (slum children).

One of the key ways in which outsiders defined young people in slum communities (as well as with reference to prostitution, drug-taking, alcoholism and violence) was by virtue of the work they did in contributing to their families, and for this they tended to be pitied. Research participants from wealthy families, restaurant owners, conference and seminar delegates, local government officials and academics were quick to inform me, when they learned that I was researching in Khlong Toey slum, that young people there were so poor they had to work to help their parents.

Young people in wealthy families did not give money to their parents because their parents earned enough themselves; enough to own their own houses and often other property, enough to take holidays abroad, to send their children to good state or private schools, to pay for extra tuition classes and to save for their children's university education. Young people in these families did not help their parents work because they did not need to, and in any case the work that their parents did (as doctors, lawyers, lecturers) was not open to assistance from them. Young people from wealthy families were not carers for their resident elders or younger siblings because they had maids (usually from Burma) who performed these duties and for this same reason they did not undertake domestic work. For these young people making merit, repaying *bunkun* and identifying themselves as good children in their

teenage years was achieved primarily through studying, and through the knowledge that this – along with the wealth that already existed in the family – would in turn make them well-placed to support their parents in the future.

Young participants from slum communities were aware of the way in which their contributions reinforced others' perceptions of them as *kon chan dtam* (low level people). For example, after describing what she had done the day before her interview, including working at her grandmother's coffee stall in the morning and looking after her younger brother in the afternoon and evening, thirteen year old Gop commented:

You may think that this is a *low-so* life. Well, yes, I help my grandmother and my mum as much as I can. At least we are not like children in Myanmar or Laos, they have to work in the fields for twenty hours every day. Or they are housemaids for the rich people and they work twenty four hours a day and hardly sleep. They are very backwards in Myanmar.

Gop's response to the identification of her as a low status person in light of the work she did for her family was creative in its evocation of an imaginary, distant other whose greater contributions made for a lower socio-economic ranking than her. In transposing the burden of low socio-economic status onto this imaginary other she attempted to advance her own position in the hierarchy, at least in her own mind. It was no co-incidence that Gop referred to young people in Laos or Myanmar; as noted in the introductory chapter, Thailand is renowned for its 'rapid and profound' economic transformation from being one of the poorest countries in the world to being a middle-income, industrial powerhouse. Young people in the slum saw theirs as a position of elevation relative to certain neighbouring countries which they readily evoked and from which they readily distanced themselves, referring to the latter's lack of development and 'backwardness'. Young people in the slum were proud of what they saw as Thailand's superiority to Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia,

although the irony that it was their parents or grandparents who provided the manual labour for its transformation yet benefitted least from it, was lost on them.

In addition to reinforcing their low socio-economic status, through their attempts to contribute to the family the young slum dwellers in this research also potentially undermined their future material advancement. Time and money spent assisting the family was time and money diverted from studying and saving. In its most severe form this entailed young people being taken out of school in order to work for the family or provide full time care for young siblings or elderly relatives (cases such as this are discussed in the following chapter).

Despite the strain that young slum dwellers experienced trying to fulfil their filial obligations, amongst those who did not have parents to whom a debt of gratitude could be paid (for example because their parents had died, sold them at birth or left them in the care of others), a certain resentment was evident. For example, during his interview twenty two year old Note lamented the fact that he had never known his 'real' parents, in particular his mother. Whilst he craved the nurture and sense of belonging that he imagined would characterise the maternal relationship, Note also longed for the opportunity that parents afford children to make merit and thereby prosper in the moral realm. The following excerpt is taken from Note's life history interview and was his response to my question about the most difficult aspects of his life:

The point is I have no family. That's the big point. I see other people and they have families and I can see when they have a problem they help each other. But I don't have that, I am alone. That's the thing, I don't have anybody to think about. If you say to me that Ganya is jealous that I have [a sponsor] well she has her dad, right? Me, I don't have this. No-one to share the problems... no-one to show *bunkun*.

After returning from fieldwork I continued correspondence with Note, and helped him with the English grammar in some of his assignments. The following excerpt is taken from a piece of creative writing that he sent to me to check before submitting it for assessment as part of his English course. It illustrates the importance of having an identifiable parent (mother) figure to whom one's filial gratitude can be shown:

This is my story. I have never seen my parents or any relatives before and I do not know if I have any. I have no idea how I came to exist in the world. When I go to bed I dream I see a white cloud drift around me. I can smell flowers and I can walk on the air. It is a very beautiful atmosphere and suddenly I hear a sweet voice call my name. An Angel says to me 'I will give you one Super Power but not for you to keep, you must give it to someone else'. I say 'I want you to give the Super Power to someone who I have never seen before in my life' (I start to cry). I pray every day that she could come to my bedside, hug me, stroke my hair gently, kiss me and say good night... My angel, please give this Super Power to her. Make her happy and healthy, make her smile and make everyday her day. Tell her that I am always waiting to help her and serve her in everything, to show her I am so grateful to her. Please give the Super Power to my lovely mum.

Discussion so far has shown how young people attempted to construct themselves as 'good children' through emphasising choice in speaking of the contributions they made to their families, and how success in this moral realm was an important feature of everyday life and dreams. Discussion has also shown how the dream of achieving high moral status in this way was somewhat elusive to participants. Family poverty and indebtedness and the related level of financial assistance required, alongside young people's low earning power made young slum dwellers ill-positioned to support their families to the degree needed, and the contributions that young people did make were on the whole overshadowed by the narrative of the uncaring teenager. Further, discussion has shown how, in the process of attempting to improve their moral status, young slum dwellers inadvertently reinforced their low socio-economic status. It has also pointed to the way in which young people tried to counter the

negative connotations of supporting the family by invoking imaginary others who were worse off, thereby attempting, albeit subjectively, to elevate their own positions. Finally, discussion so far has pointed to the way in which attempts to support the family potentially undermine future material advancement, and to the way in which having no family to support was a source of resentment. The following section turns to the tension that existed between contributing to the family and attempting to live the teenage life, discussed in the previous chapter. It explores the gendered ways in which young people approached this tension, and highlights the additional unintended consequences that ensued for young women.

DOING THE RIGHT THING AND LIVING THE TEENAGE LIFE

When young people attempted to support their families and live the teenage life they became caught in a tension: on the one hand they sought to be *dek samai mai* (modern kids) and live lives defined by leisure, friends and fun and on the other they tried to be *dek dee* (good kids) and fulfil their duties to the family through work. Whilst they attempted to deal with the tension on a practical level, for example by dividing their time between leisure activities and work, the following discussion focuses on the ways in which young people approached this tension on a more abstract level, specifically in terms of identity.

The young women and men in this research both experienced and acknowledged the tension, however they experienced it to different degrees and dealt with it in very different ways. In attempting to live the teenage life and fulfil their duties towards their families, the young men in this study tended to move in and out of different and sometimes contradictory identities, at times labelling themselves with reference to their leisure pursuits and at other times in terms of the work they did. For example the members of *Bodyfit* at times referred to themselves and each other using their on-line names or other generic, leisure-oriented designations such as *kon hip hop* (hip-hop person), and at other times using the label *work more*, a slogan used in a mobile phone advertising campaign at the time of fieldwork. However, whilst most young men expressed a wish to help their parents and be ‘good sons’, they tended to

prioritise their lifestyles of leisure, resigning themselves to failing in their duty to support the family and blaming themselves for being 'lazy' or 'useless' according to the contemporary cultural script of wayward youth. For example in response to my question concerning his feelings about how he spent his time, seventeen year old Arun stated that:

My time is nonsense. It's so nonsense. I do other things instead of helping my mum work. I spend so much time doing this, and it doesn't please anyone except for me. It doesn't help my parents. I like to hang out with friends, play the guitar, go out, play *Counterstrike* on the computer. But these things aren't useful to my parents, they don't make any money. I know that I should spend my time in a better way.

When I asked Arun why he did not help his parents more he said he did not know, and during a focus group discussion with the other *Bodyfit* members they all took similar positions. They stated that they spent too much time hanging out, that they wanted to and should help their families more but did not, and were unable to explain why. These sentiments were also echoed by other young men in their interviews and in everyday conversations. However, there are several possible explanations as to why they did not contribute more to their families. First, for some young men in this study and many others throughout Khlong Toey's slum communities, families were absent; some had passed away, some were in prison and others had moved and were not in contact, meaning that it was not always clear to whom one's contributions should be made or to whom the debt of gratitude would be payable. Second, for those who had dropped out, or been taken out, of school at a young age the work options were limited to doing manual labour at the port or selling things on the street, both of which were badly-paid and of low socio-economic status and therefore in opposition to their desire to appear as *kon samai mai* (modern people). For some, the pressure to construct themselves as modern seemed all encompassing. Third, as previously noted, a key way in which young Thai men can repay their filial debt of gratitude and make merit for their parents is by entering the monk-hood (for most this is done on a temporary basis). Whilst only one young man (a seventeen year old) spoke of his

intentions to do this, it is probable that others will get ordained at some point in their young lives as a means of fulfilling their filial obligations (ceremonies and parades through the streets of the slum celebrating boys' and young men's initiation into the monkhood were a common occurrence throughout fieldwork). As discussed above, whilst young men felt a degree of pressure to provide material support to their families, adult carers expressed lower expectations of them than they did of young women. Further, Thailand traditionally has a matrilocal culture whereby when a young couple marry the man moves into the woman's family home. Whilst contemporary living arrangements are in reality varied and encompass matrilocality, patrilocality and nuclear family set-ups amongst others, it is possible that the notion of daughters being inextricably and permanently tied to the family and sons being loosely and temporarily affiliated persists, and that this has important ramifications for the support that young men provide (and are expected to provide) for their families.

Whilst young women also took up different identities at different times with reference to the teenage life and supporting their families, they also tended to try and resolve the tension by constructing new, hybrid identities. During her interview fifteen year old Naen stated that:

It may seem like my duties are easy, but they are not. There's a lot to do and not enough time. I would like to have more time for myself, to hang out with my friends outside and see my boyfriend, not just spend time helping my parents. Well I do these things and it makes my parents mad. It seems that I can never please them with what I do. For them I don't help them enough.

When I asked Naen what she did when her parents 'get mad' she explained that she stayed quiet because it was bad *kamma* to disagree with her parents. However, staying quiet was not the only strategy she used. During a focus group discussion about young people's use of time, she replied to a question concerning what changes she would make, if any, to the time she spent at school by saying she would like to

banish all of the teachers and have the pupils teach each other. When I asked her what she would like to learn about she replied ‘I want someone to teach me how to be a really good *bitch*’. The following excerpt is taken from the discussion that followed this statement:

SM A *bitch*?

Naen Like a street girl but better, and a good one. Both at the same time... not like a *bitch* in America. Someone who is street but who can adjust and still be a good kid.

SM What’s a good kid?

Naen Good kids help their parents and stay at home, they obey their parents all the time, they don’t let their parents down. It’s difficult to be a good kid and be a street girl at the same time. I don’t know, I can’t explain it properly.

SM I’m confused.

Ganya OK first you have to understand Thai culture. It expects girls to be good, to stay at home, to do household chores and always help their parents, not to hang around with guys or be free to come and go. It expects them to stay close to home and focus on their family, help the family. This is a home girl. Then there’s a street girl. The street girls when they leave school they stay with their group, they hang out in Khlong Toey, they stick with their street gang, they wear make up and sexy clothes and flirt with guys, they take drugs and get pregnant. This is the life of street girls in Khlong Toey. The girls who contrast these two we call *bitches*. They don’t stay at home, but it doesn’t always mean they are bad... It’s not a street girl and it’s not only a home girl, it’s in between. These kids want to be street but they want to improve it, get educated, not to get into drugs or get pregnant or get AIDS. But they want their gang too, their style, their way of thinking

and their freedom, their life outside the family, but they want to make their parents proud too. This is what we call a *bitch*.

This excerpt shows how some young women attempted to manage the tension between the teenage life and contributing their families by creating identities which they forged from pre-existing stereotypes. As noted in chapter two of the thesis, this kind of active construction of hybrid identity is associated in the literature with a celebration of young people's cultural agency. Indeed, as Nilan and Feixa (2006) note in the introduction to their edited volume *Global Youth? Hybrid identities, plural worlds*: 'The notion of hybridity... involves, at least potentially, an 'emancipatory' use of culture' (2006, p.2). However, whilst creating the hybrid identity of *bitch* may signify an attempt on the part of certain participants to actively negotiate the tension between two apparently contradictory lifestyles, in doing so they reinforced perceptions of themselves as immoral, embroiling themselves in other pejorative discourses. In 2005 a Thai-American pop star, Tata Young, released a song entitled 'Sexy, Naughty, Bitchy', which soared to the top of the charts, was played on radio stations throughout the country and received a great deal of media attention. The lyrics of the chorus, repeated throughout the song, are as follows:

I pick all my skirts to be a little too sexy
Just like all of my thoughts they always get a bit naughty
When I'm out with my girls I always play a bit bitchy
Can't change the way I am sexy, naughty, bitchy me

The rest of the song contains references to being the object of boys' fantasies, being '180 to the stereotype girls like staying at home and being innocent', and to being a 'rebel to the idea of monogamy'. The song and its artist sparked a good deal of controversy throughout Thailand and prompted heavy criticism from the Thai culture ministry and members of the public, who phoned into local radio stations in their droves to complain. Young was accused of promoting immorality and posing a threat to Thai culture, wherein 'good' women are constructed as virtuous and obedient,

with their virginity intact until marriage (Van Esterik 2000, p.46). Whilst others rushed to Tata Young's defence, some even suggesting that she represents a beacon of hope for the advancement of gender equality (see *The Nation*, 3/12/2005), the overall mood during the height of the controversy surrounding *Sexy, Naughty, Bitchy* was one of contempt for her perceived sexual waywardness.

The young women in this research may or may not have borrowed the term *bitch* from its use in Tata Young's song, however the meaning they gave to it differed. They mobilised it in an attempt to manage the tension they experienced between seeking to live the teenage life on the one hand and supporting their families, fulfilling their filial duties (being 'good' daughters), on the other. It was chosen precisely as a means of signifying that they took their contributions to the family seriously, that their morality remained intact despite their engagement in the teenage life and all this engendered in terms of perceptions as wayward and uncaring. However, in selecting the label *bitch* they fuelled others' perceptions of them as sexually immoral. This was compounded by the fact that one of the main ways in which young women from the slums are perceived by outsiders is, amongst other things, as prostitutes. Many of the conversations I had during fieldwork with non-slum people about the research I was doing in Khlong Toey were useful in their illumination of a pervasive (mis)understanding that young women from the slums prostituted themselves as a matter of course, and for this they were both pitied and condemned. Back at home perceptions proved to be just as skewed and just as offensive. I recall a conversation I had with a man who came to do some work in my garden after I returned from fieldwork. We got talking about my research and when he learned that I had lived in a slum in Bangkok he said:

I've got a mate who spends half the year in Bangkok, or is it Singapore? No, it's Bangkok. Yeah. He's a young lad. He works six months in England and then what he earns he can afford a very nice life over there. He says to me 'Kev, all I want is cheap food, cheap beer and cheap women'. And that's what he gets over there innit, I mean he can have a girl for a fiver a week. She's probably one of your mates in the slum ha ha ha ha ha.

Whilst prostitution may be a reality for some it is not true for all, and even where it is, the young women in question defined themselves with reference to things quite other than prostitution and went to considerable lengths to dissociate themselves from it, for example by constructing their relationships with men in romantic terms and downplaying the issue of economic exchange, or by emphasising the needs and demands of their families and the priority that they gave to these. As Montgomery notes in her (2001) ethnography of child prostitution in Thailand, the impetus to distance oneself from prostitution and the stigma it carries can be strong.

Regardless of the actuality of their circumstances, to be identified as prostitutes was extremely insulting for the young women in this research, who managed to get by and struggled to get ahead within a socio-economic system that marginalised them and a set of moral-cultural parameters which decried their sexual waywardness at the same time as relying on them for sexual entertainment and condoning men's virility and unofficially sanctioning male infidelity³⁶. Many young women in this research were aware of and displeased with this construction of slum women, and yet by adopting the identity of *bitch* they unwittingly gave it credence.

The particular identities constructed by other young women in their attempts to manage the tension between living the teenage life and working for the family varied, as the following quote from fifteen year old Nan demonstrates:

If you ask about me, I will tell you that I am a *Lock* girl. I like to hang out with my friends in Lock 1 in the [disused food stall] and chit chat. I used to be a runaway but now I live with my granny. I'm not like a home girl but at least I am close to granny here in case she needs me.

³⁶ Despite the outlawing of the 'mia noi' (minor wife) phenomenon in Thailand, the practice of having several 'wives' is common.

For Nan, a *Lock* girl straddled being a runaway and being a home girl. Like *bitch* it was a product of pre-existing stereotypes self-consciously mobilised in an attempt to manage the difficulties experienced in living the teenage life and honouring their filial duties. However, also like the use of *bitch* it had adverse, unintended consequences. *Lock*, followed by a number, is the name given to several slum communities in Khlong Toey. For Nan, identifying herself as a *Lock* girl was a way of signifying a closeness to home (relative to being a runaway) and the related duty towards her grandmother who was in poor health, and thereby attempting to enhance her moral status. However in so doing she reinforced others' perceptions of her as *kon chan dtam*.

Within the slum, the *Lock* communities were considered particularly 'low', or 'bad', places. They were notorious for housing drug addicts, thieves and violent gangs, and during fieldwork one of them was in the process of being demolished whilst others had been earmarked for clearance. Residents from other communities tried to avoid them when they could, and I was constantly advised not to walk through the *Locks* on my way to the bus stop outside. When I was first looking for a room to rent in the slum I was warned by residents not to look in the *Lock* communities as they were 'bad' places and the people in them were dangerous.

The wealthy informants in this research were not aware of the slum's internal subdivision into separate communities, of the names given to them, or of the socio-economic and moral hierarchies that operated between and within them, and so would not have grasped the complexity and subtlety that attended Nan's identification as a *Lock* girl. For them, the streets of the slum were outside, and on this basis alone they carried negative connotations. Whilst the streets were also perceived negatively by slum dwellers, as highlighted above in Ganya's explanation of the term *bitch* and its derivations, for wealthy people they were particularly disreputable. Wealthy young people spent very little time outside. They lived in air-conditioned houses that were separated from the streets beyond by reinforced doors and windows, electronic security gates, fences topped with barbed wire and in some cases armed security guards. In the mornings they travelled to school in air-

conditioned cars, after school they attended extra tuition classes convened in air-conditioned learning centres (often inside shopping malls) and in the evenings they travelled back to their enclosed houses in locked, air-conditioned cars. For wealthy Thais, young people in slum communities were defined in part by their existence on and alignment with the streets outside:

The problem in Khlong Toey is with the environment, the kids there they don't know the good environment, so they soak up the bad one. You will see them hanging out in the streets, just sitting around. My son visited Khlong Toey once with his school because his school makes a donation to a foundation there. The kids there are poor, they don't go to school, they have no-one to guide them

(Wealthy father of a thirteen year old boy)

For this man, a consultant surgeon, the streets were synonymous with immorality and poverty, states which he assumed were linked and would be absorbed by young people if they spent too long, or indeed any time, in them. For others, the streets – in particular those of the inner city and especially those within slum communities – were synonymous with danger and dirt. My wealthy host family would insist every time I left the house, and particularly vehemently if they knew I was visiting the slum, that I avoided the streets, trying to persuade me to ride in taxis everywhere I went, insisting that I made straight for the offices of the NGO which was my initial entry point into the slum, calling me on my mobile phone to check whether I had obeyed their orders and once, in the early days of my research, driving to a bus stop to collect me for fear that I would otherwise be attacked. I recall too the insistence that I shower and change my clothes before dinner whenever I returned from researching in Khlong Toey, an insistence that was not replicated after I had conducted research with wealthy young people or their adult carers, all of which took place in air-conditioned offices, at school, in shopping malls or in their homes.

For others, being outside was associated with the darkening effects of the sun on the skin, which in turn signified low social status. Thai people in general do not sunbathe; in fact all of the Thai people I have encountered avoid the sun whenever possible, and whilst this is undoubtedly connected to the discomfort that ensues from its heat, discussions with research participants and friends, inside and outside the slum, revealed that it is also related to the fear that it would make their skin darker, and this in turn was associated with looking poor, dirty and backward. One morning after an English club session at the library train I suggested a neighbourhood walk with a group of young women and whilst they were reasonably happy to show me around the dark, covered labyrinthine alleyways they would not spend more than a minute outside. When I asked why, Cream (a thirteen year old girl) said that she did not want her skin to go black. At this Deuy, another thirteen year old girl, retorted that it did not matter if it went black because where we were walking was like Sri Lanka anyway. They all laughed and when I asked what she meant, Deuy replied that the particular neighbourhood we were in 'stank like a toilet', that 'the people were beggars' and that the children of the community, including herself, did not go to school.

This discussion points to the ways in which the *Locks* and the streets were viewed negatively, whether the emphasis was on poverty or immorality or both, and whether the association was direct or indirect, for example with reference to danger, dirt or skin colour. There was an assumption that those who identified with the *Locks* or the streets embodied that negativity, themselves becoming synonymous with it. In the process of constructing her identity as a *Lock girl*, although her purpose was to emphasise her morality, Nan associated herself with disreputable places and thereby, in the eyes of others, came to be seen as poor and immoral into the bargain.

Particular labels and identities varied amongst young women, however the creation of hybrid ones such as *bitch* and *Lock girl* shows how some went to considerable lengths to try and deal with the tension they experienced in seeking to live the teenage life as well as fulfil their obligations to their families, and how they did this by self-consciously constructing identities from what they had at their disposal.

However, in constructing identities which aimed to emphasise attentiveness to the family and the moral realm as well as to the teenage life, these young women unwittingly reinforced others' negative perceptions of them as 'low people', or as immoral, or both.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the contributions that young slum dwellers made to their families. It has explored one of the prominent ways in which they attempted to construct themselves as *dek dee*, the outcomes of their endeavours, and the unintended side effects that resulted. It has also explored the way in which young slum dwellers attempted to manage the tension between contributing to their families and living the teenage life, and some of the further side effects of these efforts, in particular for young women.

The chapter has shown how enhancing moral status was of vital importance to young slum dwellers, something they were strongly oriented towards succeeding in and therefore a fundamental component of a better life as they saw it. In this, the discussion has shown how marginalised youth, as well as attempting to take part in the dominant culture of global consumer capitalism (as discussed in the previous chapter), struggled actively to define themselves in accordance with certain moral conventions dominant in local culture, to participate in the latter and be accepted on its grounds. In this, the chapter has pointed to the struggle experienced by young people living in urban poverty in a context of profound socio-economic transition to negotiate two sets of cultural-moral parameters, without the resources really necessary for success in either realm.

Discussion in this chapter has shown how, although young slum dwellers attempted to construct themselves as 'good children' through contributing to their families, the dream of enhancing their moral status remained elusive because they were by definition – by virtue of their age, socio-economic position and related earning power

– poorly positioned to contribute to the extent that their families required, and related to this because the contributions they did make were eclipsed by the (gendered) narrative of the unhelpful teenager. This points to the way in which fulfilling one's side of the intergenerational bargain can be made extremely difficult for young people in marginalised communities. It also points to the struggle experienced by older generations living in urban poverty in transition economies to come to terms with the shift in norms surrounding youth and parenting, and to the strain placed on intergenerational relations as they are experienced by the urban poor living through periods of profound socio-economic change.

This chapter has also shown how, by attempting to identify and present themselves as 'good' sons and daughters and augment their moral standing in the main ways available to them, young slum dwellers unwittingly reinforced their low socio-economic status: in the context of this research it was only young people in positions of socio-economic disadvantage who contributed to their families financially and were so integral to the performance of domestic and care work, and this was well understood across the socio-economic spectrum. Here, young slum dwellers entered the game on such disadvantaged terms that they could only enhance their moral status in ways that entrenched their low socio-economic standing. In addition, in trying to manage the tension between living the teenage life and contributing to the family, young women further reinforced both their low socio-economic *and* moral status; by selecting labels and hybrid identities for themselves which were intended to reflect their commitments to their families as well as to the teenage life, they signified to others immorality as well as poverty. This points to the way in which marginalised youth, in attempting to elevate their positions within the moral realm, unwittingly entrench their low positioning within the socio-economic sphere. In addition, this chapter has pointed to the way in which young slum dwellers' attempts to support their families and enhance their moral status can undermine their future material advancement.

The way in which young slum dwellers present their practices of contribution as a matter of *choice* speaks of a strong sense of agency; of a sense of the self as in

control of its moral identity and as the ultimate director of daily life in the moral realm. This sense of agency is further emphasised in young women's highly self-conscious creation of hybrid identities, wherein they select from the different scripts at their disposal in the configuration of new subjectivities intended to show their alignment with both global consumer culture and local cultural-moral norms. And yet this sense of agency is ironic, for young slum dwellers remain profoundly manoeuvred by a complex combination of local and global cultural, moral and socio-economic forces. Indeed, for example, the very identities they choose for themselves reflect the gendered and generational cultural norms that determine which practices and ways of relating are and are not acceptable, as well as the socio-economic inequalities that give rise to their disadvantaged positioning and others' negative perceptions of them. This ironic sense of agency in the face of being profoundly manoeuvred (also alluded to in the previous chapter) points to one of the major tensions that arises in the construction of the self in modernity.

CHAPTER 6

MATERIALISING THE FUTURE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers young people's attempts to build better material futures. It opens with a vignette which presents brief case studies of three young slum dwellers, focusing on their current living arrangements, their dreams for the future and the tactics they use to try and turn those dreams into reality. This is followed by a brief discussion of a 'better future', which offers a working definition of how the concept is utilised here, notes various limitations to the scope of its treatment in this chapter and points to some of the prominent local and national discourses that inform it and in part explain the centrality of the concept in participants' narratives and practices. The next section explores the key practices involved in young people's attempts to build better futures and provides basic figures concerning the numbers of young people engaged in each practice at the time of data collection, as well as reference to age, gender and socio-economic patterns. Discussion then highlights one of the overarching characteristics of young slum dwellers' attempts to get ahead, returning to the case studies used in the opening vignette to illustrate the argument made, then turns to the prominent way in which participants themselves speak about the future and the process of working towards it. The subsequent section identifies a resonance between the experiences and narratives of young people in their search for a better future, and the ideals promoted within certain elements of the context in which they are located, suggesting that it is by virtue of operating in accordance with these very ideals that young slum dwellers find the journey towards material advancement so arduous and the destination so hard to reach.

VIGNETTE

Bee

When I met her, Bee was thirteen years old and was living with her mother, her eleven year old half sister and her adopted younger brother, the six year old son of her mother's cousin who came to live with Bee and her family after his father died of AIDS and his mother discovered she was HIV positive. Bee and her family lived in a rented room in a two-storey, wooden *soi* house, an over-crowded dwelling with unreliable water and electricity supplies. Bee was studying at the local community school and her mother did numerous jobs, including cleaning offices, washing clothes for neighbours and casual labouring. Her half-sister had dropped out of school and did not work, and her adopted brother attended a local NGO-run nursery.

At the time of interviewing Bee was planning to continue her studies to the highest level she could. She dreamed of having a well paid, secure job as an adult, either as a teacher or an office worker:

My first dream is to finish a Bachelor's degree. It would be sad to stop studying as it can help you to succeed in life, not have so much hardship. The real future dream is to have a secure job. First I wanted to be a teacher but now I'm not sure, maybe I can get a job in an office. It's important to have money so if we have a problem we don't have a big hardship.

During her interview Bee emphasised how hard she studied and stated that she was determined to do well at school in order to build a better future, although it was not easy to find the time or space to concentrate since she was primarily responsible for the day to day care of her adopted younger brother. Bee received a few small grants for her schooling through two local NGOs, and drew mainly on her mother and her mother's network of friends and acquaintances in the slum to cover the cost of basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothes. She also worked, cleaning offices every

morning before school, and saved as much of her earnings as she could to put towards her future education.

Nan

Nan was fifteen when I met her and was living with her grandmother in a rented room in a three-storey concrete shop house that also housed nine other families. She worked full time making handicrafts at a small local NGO, where her grandmother also worked as a part time cook. Nan had high hopes for her future:

When I come to be an adult I would love to be a tour guide using Japanese language. People are very rich in Japan and they tip well. Yes, I want something more than what I have now. This dream is a very big one! Will it come true? I think it depends on how well I can study.

In order to try and realise her dream Nan planned to stop work and return to school to resume her studies. A few months before I met her, the NGO where she was working had agreed to sponsor her education from the beginning of the following academic year, and Nan's grandmother had agreed to support Nan whilst she studied. Nan was also waiting for her father to send some money to assist with her schooling. In the meantime Nan was trying to teach herself Japanese using books that she borrowed from the library of a Japanese NGO in the slum. At the time of interviewing Nan saw herself as very much in limbo, waiting for the next crucial step in her journey towards a better future:

My life is very boring these days. Because I can't go to school I have to do something and earn some money to help my granny so I work. Someone at [a local NGO] offered me a job in the handicraft section and that's what I do. I would like to do a different job, but I don't know what I can do. Really, I

want to be a tour guide. That's why I want to go back to school. Now I can see how important school is.

Jim

Jim was seventeen when I met him and living in a two-storey, family-owned wooden *soi* house with a friend, his friends' parents and three younger sisters, as well as two other friends also in need of accommodation. Jim worked for his friend's mother, who ran a small street stall selling make-up and other beauty products at night in one of Bangkok's busiest nightlife spots. Jim's friends worked as casual labourers, his friend's sisters were at school, and his friend's father was unable to work due to liver failure and partial paralysis. Jim also had hopes of building a better future:

I would like to have a good job, one that earns good money, enough so I can live in a place of my own, not have to stay with [my friend's] family. There are too many people there. I would like to earn a lot of money. Maybe set up my own business selling things to tourists.

Although Jim spoke at different points in his interview of different ideas about his future, for example of becoming a stunt man or moving to the north of Thailand to track down relatives to work in their family business, these were united by a sense of searching for work that would allow him to secure a better material quality of life. He was aware that in order to get the good job he sought he would have to resume his education and to this end he enrolled in the community adult college at weekends to prepare for his lower secondary school exams. This entailed attending classes for two hours each on Saturdays and Sundays, and completing approximately five hours of homework each week. In order to cover the cost of this he had borrowed money from his friend's mother and paid her back in weekly instalments from his earnings on her street stall. He also drew heavily on his friend's mother as well as his friends for food, shelter and extra money in order to get by.

BUILDING A BETTER MATERIAL FUTURE: PRELIMINARY NOTES

The notion of building a better material future was a strong feature throughout fieldwork within the slum communities, both within every day conversations and in interviews with young people and adult carers, and was understood as the attempt to escape from material, and in particular financial, hardship and improve one's material standard of living, whatever objective level of relative poverty was experienced by individuals. In this discussion the concept of building a better material future encompasses getting by as well as getting ahead, as the former is necessary for the latter.

This research recognises that hardship and attempts to escape it are multidimensional and can refer in particular to the social or relational realms as well as the material, and that these multiple dimensions are interrelated. However, this chapter focuses on young people's attempts to build better futures in the *material* realm, viewing their relationships with others in terms of their instrumental roles in shaping those attempts.

In broad terms material hardship entails having insufficient money with which to pay for basic necessities such as nutritious food, adequate sanitation, clean water, secure (and decent quality) housing and clothing, and to pay for education or repay debts. This hardship can be understood in the context of broader structures in the national and global context such as socio-economic inequality, an inadequate welfare system, a highly unequal education system and labour market segmentation. However, such hardship is a relative concept, in four ways of particular pertinence to this study, and as such requires a little elucidation here.

First, material hardship is relative in a national and local (city-wide), sense. In relation to an absolute, national poverty line some of the young people and their families in this research may have fallen below it and some above it. In relation to the wealthy participants in this research, the slum dwellers were all in positions of

material disadvantage, in terms of housing, income, assets, investments, education, and disposable income for things such as holidays.

Second, within Khlong Toey slum, material hardship is also relative in a historical or generational sense. For adult carers who grew up in the slum material experiences in childhood and youth were marked by a lack of physical infrastructure (an absence of paved walkways, water and electricity supplies and rubbish collection services), by a lack of educational opportunities, and for many young women by the enforced care of large numbers of younger siblings. For young people living in many of the Khlong Toey slum communities at the time of fieldwork these aspects of life had changed, in light of the nation-wide slum upgrading strategy which followed Thailand's economic boom and the inequality this gave rise to, and in light of the country's demographic transition to lower fertility rates (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005, p.201).

Third, the material hardship experienced by individual young people in this research was relative to that experienced by other young people living in the same, neighbouring and more distant slum communities. For example, for some it entailed living in accommodation which was owned by the family but which was extremely overcrowded, having adult carers who earned very little money, having insufficient food and having to work long hours in physically demanding jobs. For others it entailed living in rented accommodation with a single adult carer, having an adult carer who earned money but spent it on alcohol and/or gambling, having sufficient food only by virtue of outside assistance, and combining education and work. Others lived in family owned houses with a small number of residents, had parents who earned enough money to pay bills and buy food, and were able to attend school full time. The focus in this chapter is on the process of attempting to build a better material future whatever particular level of material hardship individual young people experienced at the time of fieldwork.

Fourth, and related to the previous point, material hardship was relative within individual young people's lives; periods of severe adversity were followed by

periods of relative prosperity and vice-versa, for example with a young person becoming homeless overnight due to the breakdown of family relationships, living with friends on a temporary basis then returning to live with relatives. Further research, perhaps including longitudinal, would be required to explore young people's trajectories in and out of different levels of hardship and the reasons behind particular life courses. As with the above point, this chapter focuses on the *process* of young people's attempts to build better futures, regardless of the particular level of hardship entailed in their material circumstances at the time of data collection.

The desire to build better material futures is perhaps particularly pronounced in a context such as Khlong Toey slum where poverty exists in such close proximity to staggering levels of material wealth. Further, it can be understood in the context of Thailand's focus on *pattana* (development), conceptualised within official discourse as economic growth and related advances in material standards of living. The Thai authorities have explicitly sought and advocated the country's modernisation from the reign of King Mongkut in the nineteenth century (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005, p.41), and in 1961 the Thai government issued its first official social and economic development plan. Since then each five year plan has been strongly oriented towards economic growth, with later plans also encompassing improvements in and access to education, health and housing. From the 1980s onwards the notion of *pattana* found increasingly widespread expression within Khlong Toey slum communities, as prominent figureheads championed the causes of Bangkok's slum residents, as NGOs in receipt of national and foreign development aid proliferated, and as slum dwellers began to make public demands for improvements to their standards of living (Askew 2002, p.151). More recently, in particular since the 1997 economic crisis, Thai development discourse has expanded to include the notion of 'people centred development', with the incorporation of Sufficiency Economy thinking into the country's latest National and Social Development Plans, and with Thailand's 2007 Human Development Report focusing on the principles and application of the Sufficiency approach. Within Sufficiency thinking an exclusive focus on economic growth is rejected in favour of a 'human development' approach, which 'puts people and their well-being at the centre of development and provides an alternative to the traditional, more narrowly focused economic growth paradigm' (UNDP 2007, p.xvi).

However, economic growth and material advancement persist as the mainstay of ‘development’, irrespective of attempts to expand the latter’s scope.

Despite the strong local and national historical orientation towards economic development and despite being strongly oriented towards material advancement themselves, the young slum dwellers in this study were not consistently intent on working towards futures free from the material hardship they knew. There were many times during fieldwork when participants seemed defeated or deflated, when they engaged in self-destructive practices such as gambling and alcohol or drug abuse, and times when simply getting through the day was challenge enough for them. Further, as indicated in the previous two chapters, other aspects of their lives in the present such as trying to construct themselves as *kon samai mai* (‘modern people’) and contributing to their families were sometimes counter-productive to their endeavours to secure material advancement in the future. Nonetheless, the search for better material futures was a key feature in their narratives and in the organisation of daily life.

KEY PRACTICES

There are three main, interrelated practices that young people engaged in, in their attempts to get by, get ahead and bring about the futures they envisaged; seeking support from others, studying and working. The first of these underpins the latter two; it was only with support from others that young slum dwellers were able to study and find work, and through these that they struggled to get ahead. This section presents figures and patterns pertaining to the young people in the core sample with reference to these key practices. The data on which the figures are based is that which was accurate at the time of its collection, however it is important to bear in mind that they offer a snap shot of circumstances which change readily, for example as young people acquire patrons or lose support from parents, drop out of school or re-enter the education system, and lose jobs or find new work.

Studying

At the time of interviewing, twenty one young slum dwellers in the core sample were involved in some form of studying. Seven of these young people were of compulsory school age (up to fifteen years) and fourteen were above this, a point which may in part illustrate a widespread understanding of the role of education in achieving material advancement, and which may reflect the proximity of the study to a local NGO whose core activity is educational sponsorship and whose offices are adjacent to a slum school. The table below provides figures concerning the numbers of young people engaged in particular forms of study.

Table 6. Numbers of young slum dwellers engaged in different forms of study.

Type of study	Regular government school (FT)	Community college (PT)	Other vocational training college (PT)	University (FT)	NGO classes (PT)
Numbers of young people	11	4	3	2	1
	7 female	All male	2 male	1 female	Female
	4 male		1 female	1 male	

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

Working

Twenty two young people were engaged in paid work at the time of interviewing. This figure includes any work which was remunerated, including that undertaken for family members. Three of these (two young women and one young man in their early twenties) were engaged in formal work (as well as informal), specifically teaching English, waitressing and computer game programming. The remaining nineteen (ten young men and nine young women who spanned the sample age range) undertook informal work, such as serving at market stalls and food stalls, preparing products such as fruit, spices and jasmine garlands for mobile street vendors, cleaning, collecting rubbish and labouring at the port. The amount of time spent working

varied greatly between young people, in particular depending on whether they combined work and study and if they did then whether they studied full time or part time. The amount of money that young people earned ranged from twenty to one hundred and twenty baht per hour. The table below provides figures concerning the numbers of young people engaged in formal and informal sector work.

Table 7. Numbers of young slum dwellers engaged in different forms of work.

Type of work	Formal sector work	Informal sector work
Numbers of young people	3	19
	2 female	10 male
	1 male	9 female

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

Turning to others

All young slum dwellers turned to different key people at different times in their lives, and to a range of people at any given time, for support in their endeavours to build the material futures of which they dreamt. This discussion focuses on a select number of key people –family members, friends and patrons – as it was these whom young slum dwellers emphasised in their narratives as being particularly significant. For the purposes of this discussion ‘family member’ and ‘friend’ refer to those whom young people identified as such, and ‘patron’ is used to denote those whom young people identified as helping or supporting them significantly (in ways that related to material advancement).

The kind of support that young people sought from others consisted of the provision of assistance with various aspects of education (both financial and academic), the provision of jobs, the provision of money, and the provision of basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing, all of which would allow young people to concentrate their efforts on getting ahead. This section provides figures pertaining to each group of people.

Family members

At the time of interviewing, twenty of the twenty eight young slum dwellers in the core sample turned to family members for support in their attempts to build better material futures, and eight did not. The tables below provide figures concerning the particular family members to whom young people turned and, in the cases where they did not draw on family members, the reasons for this are given. Whilst those who sought support from their families did so from more than one person, they all identified an individual or a couple to whom they turned as a main source.

Table 8. Numbers of young slum dwellers who turned to different family members for support.

Family member(s)	Both Parents	Mother only	Mainly Grandmother	Mainly Aunt or Uncle	Mainly Older Brother
Number of young people who turned to them for support	8	5	4	2	1

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

Table 9. Numbers of young people who did not turn to family members for support and reasons for this.

Reasons that young people did not receive support from family members	Young people were main providers for family	Young people were estranged from family
Number of young people this applied to	4	4

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

Those who sought support from both parents were at the lower end of the sample age range, and both genders were equally represented. Those who sought support mainly from single mothers or grandmothers were also at the lower end of the age range, and in these cases they were mostly young women. Those who turned to aunts or uncles were older and of both genders, and the one person who sought support from an older sibling was a young man at the lower end of the age range. All eight young people who did not turn to family members for assistance were at the higher end of the age range. Most of those who were the main providers for their families were young women, and those who were estranged from their families were young men.

The kind of support that young people sought from family members in connection with material advancement was mixed: for some it was limited to food and shelter, for others it consisted of work and pocket money as well as food and shelter, and for others it included schooling expenses as well as pocket money and basic necessities. There appears to be no significant relationship between the form of support received and the particular family members giving it.

Friends

At the time of interviewing, all twenty eight young slum dwellers in the core sample turned to their friends for support. This assistance took the form of basic necessities, money and help with studying, or a combination of these. In the majority of cases the kind of support sought from friends tended to be in the form of small amounts of money, food and shelter.

Patrons

Seeking patronage from outside the family was particularly pronounced amongst young slum dwellers in this research. Twenty one young slum dwellers sought some form of patronage at the time of interviewing, and some young people turned to more than one patron. The table below provides figures concerning the numbers of young people who drew on different kinds of patrons. The high proportion of participants in

receipt of NGO sponsorship is probably due to a bias in the sample noted above, whereby access to young people was initially gained through connections with an NGO whose focus is on educational sponsorship, and through a community school affiliated with this NGO.

Table 10. Numbers of young people who turned to different kinds of patron for support.

Type of patron	NGOs	Neighbours	Wealthy Partners	Very Wealthy Outsiders
Numbers of young people who drew on this form of patronage	15	12	2	1

Source: Author's semi-structured interviews.

With the exception of three young people, the majority of those in receipt of NGO scholarships were at the lower end of the age range, and there were slightly more young women than young men. Those who received support from a neighbour spanned the whole sample age range and both genders. Those in receipt of support from wealthy partners were young women in their early twenties, and the one person who received support from an extremely wealthy outsider was a young man in his early twenties.

In the cases where young people were supported by NGOs, the assistance given was mainly in the form of educational sponsorship. Where support was sought from neighbours it tended to be in the form of food, shelter and access to work. Support from wealthy partners took the form of assistance with food, shelter and money, and support from the wealthy outsider took the form of considerable amounts of money as well as accommodation and employment.

DOING IT THEMSELVES

As the above discussion illustrates, the young slum dwellers in this research sought support from various key people in order to live, study and work and thereby attempt to build the material futures they longed for. However, despite turning to numerous others, and despite being firmly embedded in networks of various forms, their attempts to get ahead were marked by a strong sense of being alone in their endeavours, because the support available to them – and in most cases that which had been available to them throughout their lives – was extremely fragile. In order to demonstrate something of this fragility I return below to the young people who featured in this chapter's opening vignette, expanding on the data provided there and elaborating on the circumstances in which the young people in question lived.

Bee

Thirteen year old Bee dreamt of completing a Bachelor's degree and becoming a teacher or an office worker, and relied on her mother, her mother's network of friends and neighbours, and two NGO-affiliated sponsors in order to try and fulfil her dreams. However, the sources of support open to her were far from reliable. In the year before fieldwork Bee, her mother and sister were forced to flee their previous rented room and neighbourhood because their mother could not afford to pay the rent or to repay her debt to a local money lender. Fearing the consequences of non-repayment they moved to a building site where Bee's mother had found work as a casual labourer, and they lived there in a corrugated iron hut for a couple of months. Bee and her sister continued to attend school during this time. After two months Bee's mother decided to leave the construction site due to concerns over the girls' safety and they spent the following few months living on the street. During this time Bee and her sister stopped going to school and did whatever casual work they could find in order to help their mother make ends meet. After a few months Bee's mother managed to borrow enough money from a friend to pay the deposit for a rented room in a different community, where they had been living for some months when I met them. Bee had returned to school but her sister had not. Despite providing shelter for her children (as well as the informally-adopted son of one of her cousins), Bee's mother continued to struggle financially; she had not paid the money back to her

friend for the deposit on the room and she had borrowed more money from a local money lender in order to pay a telephone company for an enormous bill that Bee's younger sister incurred (but had actually not paid the phone bill or the debt to the money lender because she had used the money for 'daily living'). At the time of interviewing she faced prosecution by the telephone company, feared violent reprisals from the money lender and was considering fleeing the neighbourhood.

The precariousness of the support that Bee's mother, Mae Bua, was able to provide for her family was in part a reflection and extension of the insecurity which characterised her own past. Mae Bua was born in Khlong Toey slum to a single mother whose husband left before Mae Bua was born. She had to leave school after four years of primary education and worked in a local market in order to support her mother in the struggle for daily survival. The subsequent work opportunities open to Mae Bua were limited to the informal sector: street vending, construction work, and cleaning – all menial jobs with low social status and inadequate pay. When she was young Mae Bua and her mother were twice relocated from their home as part of the Thai government's shifting policy towards the 'problem' of urban slums – once to a different part of Khlong Toey and once to the outskirts of Bangkok where social networks and work opportunities transpired to be inadequate. She experienced frequent beatings at the hands of her mother's boyfriends, and went on to have violent relationships with the fathers of both of her children. Her first boyfriend, Bee's father, left her when Bee was a baby and her subsequent boyfriend died several years ago. Low education due to childhood poverty and a concomitant reproduction of disadvantaged economic positioning, an absence of adequate social security nets and gendered violence all contributed to making the support that Mae Bua was able to provide for Bee very fragile. After returning from fieldwork I learned that Bee was doing well at school, although one of her sponsors withdrew his support for her education, and she continued to work as a cleaner every morning, doing longer hours to try and compensate for the loss of sponsorship. She was living with an aunt and her aunt's family on a temporary basis because Mae Bua was working very long hours in order to try and repay her debts and felt that she was not able to provide the care necessary for her children.

Nan

Fifteen year old Nan dreamt of returning to school, learning Japanese and becoming a tour guide. She relied in particular on her grandmother and a small local NGO in her attempt to realise her dreams, and also held out hope for the financial support promised by her father. However, by the end of fieldwork each of these forms of assistance had all but evaporated. By the time I met her, Nan's grandmother (Ba Lek) had been suffering from diabetes for a number of years, and despite taking medication found that she was unable to work the hours demanded by her job. The NGO that employed her as a cook agreed to let her work part time, but this meant a reduction in income and she found it increasingly difficult to support Nan financially, especially since her husband's recent death had already diminished her own financial security. In addition to and connected with the financial hardship Ba Lek experienced, she had begun to suffer with the emotional strain of being Nan's primary carer. She worried constantly about Nan staying out late and would scour the neighbourhood at nights looking for Nan when she wasn't home by her curfew of 10 p.m., and she found Nan's spending habits unsustainable. Ba Lek found it increasingly difficult to cope and the two of them began to argue frequently.

As with Mae Bua, the fragility of the support that Ba Lek was able to provide for Nan can be understood in part in the context of vulnerability that has marked her own life. Ba Lek was born in the north east of Thailand into a rice farming family. Her father died when she was young and her mother struggled to raise her family of six children and keep the farm going. Ba Lek attended school for four years and left in order to help her mother on the farm, but when she was fifteen she decided to move to the nearest town to work as a waitress since repeated crop failures meant there was insufficient money coming into the household and a desperate need for it. It was in the town to which she relocated that Ba Lek met her first husband, with whom she had two children. However, he left when Ba Lek was twenty three and at that point she moved to Bangkok where she undertook numerous informal jobs, leaving her children with their grandmother in the countryside. Ba Lek met her late husband when she was in her thirties, and she moved to Khlong Toey where he worked in a chemical factory and where she continued to work in various casual, informal sector

jobs. Again, low education due to childhood poverty and a concomitant disadvantage within the labour market, as well as inadequate social security nets, all contributed to the fragility that characterised the support Ba Lek was able to provide.

In addition to the wavering support available from her grandmother, the NGO that had earlier promised to support Nan in resuming her studies withdrew their offer, as it transpired to be conditional on Nan's conversion to Christianity. The NGO was affiliated to a community church and directed by the church pastor and his wife, and in return for their patronage Nan was told she must respect God, attend church every Sunday and undertake the bible study set for young people in the congregation and discussed in study groups after Sunday services. Nan did not want to do these things, and following the rules laid down by the pastor and his wife was very uncomfortable for her. After a short period of deliberation she determined that the conversion expected of her in return for educational sponsorship was a price that she could not pay³⁷.

As well as the fragility that characterised the support available from her grandmother and the local NGO, the financial assistance that Nan hoped for from her father did not materialise. Nan's parents broke up when she was three years old and her mother moved out of the family home. Nan does not know where her mother went, but was told by her grandmother that her father was an alcoholic and her mother could not tolerate the behaviour born of his drinking. A few years later Nan's father lost his job and took Nan with him to live in the basement of an apartment building, where they stayed for about a year. During this time Nan's father earned small amounts of money collecting rubbish for recycling and Nan started school, but left to help her father work. For the next four years Nan and her father moved back and forth between the streets and various forms of temporary accommodation, and Nan was in and out of school. When Nan was eleven her father began a new relationship, but Nan did not get on with her father's new partner and left for Bangkok, to live with

³⁷ This is perhaps a rather extreme example of what seemed to be a widespread phenomenon of young people refusing NGO-organised patronage because of the conditions attached to it (specifically becoming morally indebted to the NGO and obligated to respond to all requests made of them).

her grandmother in Khlong Toey slum. Nan's father promised that he would support her financially by providing money for her schooling, but he did not have the money at that time. After a year Nan's grandmother sent Nan back to the north east of Thailand to live with her father and his partner, and in turn they sent Nan back to Bangkok to live with an aunt and uncle, also in Khlong Toey slum. Nan found life with her aunt and uncle unbearable; she was not allowed to go out in the evenings and if she did she was beaten on her return. She left her aunt and uncle's house, this time to stay with a friend whose parents ran a street-food stall, where she worked in return for food and a place to sleep. When Nan was thirteen she moved back in with her grandmother and when she was fourteen she began working at the local NGO. Shortly after I met Nan, her father announced that he and his partner were expecting a baby and that he would be unable to provide the money for Nan to return to school as his financial commitments were now elsewhere. Shortly after returning from fieldwork I learned that Nan left her job at the NGO, had not yet returned to school, and was dividing her time between her grandmother's room and several friends' houses, doing whatever work she could find to earn a little money.

Jim

Seventeen year old Jim dreamt of getting a good job, earning good money and living independently, and drew heavily on his friend's mother (Mae Goi) for accommodation, work, money and assistance with college fees in order to try and bring his dreams to life. However it transpired that this source of support, so central to Jim's endeavours, was also highly precarious. During fieldwork Mae Goi fled the neighbourhood because of considerable debts to a community savings group and a local money lender, which she was unable to repay. Initially Jim continued to stay at her house and run her make-up stall but later moved in with his step-grandmother whilst deciding what to do next, and he withdrew from the community college course on which he had enrolled. An interview with Mae Goi's son revealed that this was not the first time Mae Goi had been forced to accrue such substantial and unsustainable debts in order to support her family. Six years previous to fieldwork Mae Goi and her husband had been forced to leave their old neighbourhood and take their son out of school because of debts to local money lenders. Since moving to

Khlong Toey slum Mae Goi's husband suffered from liver failure, had become paralysed on his left side and was unable to work, adding further pressure to the considerable financial hardship that Mae Goi already experienced. For Jim, the material support she was able to give transpired to be short lived.

Jim neither sought nor received support from his immediate family. He was born in Khlong Toey and had lived with his mother and father there until he was two years old, when his parents split up and his father left. Shortly after this his mother remarried and Jim, his mother and step-father moved to an upgraded slum community. His mother and step-father were both in work and things went well for a while. Jim went to school until he was ten, but at this point his mother had a row with her sister over the inheritance of family property, and had to leave Khlong Toey. She took Jim with her and left Jim's step-father behind. Jim and his mother moved to the outskirts of Bangkok and Jim left school to work with his mother as a labourer in a fruit and vegetable market. When Jim was twelve his mother's new boyfriend moved in with them, and life at home gradually became intolerable, as he was regularly beaten for reasons that he still struggles to understand. When he was fifteen Jim ran away, and has since lost contact with his mother. He returned to Khlong Toey to find his step-father, to whom he had been very close. His step-father had just been evicted from the community where he had been living as it was being knocked down to make room to expand the port, and was renting a room in another community. Jim stayed with him for a while, but his step-father worked as a long distance lorry driver for the Port Authority of Thailand and was often away. Whilst on a job driving back from Laos Jim's step-father was involved in a road accident and was sent to prison for eighteen months. During this time Jim stayed alternately with his step-grandmother and with friends, and struggled to find work to support himself. He often stole or begged for food and did whatever casual work he could find, such as collecting rubbish and running errands for neighbours and local businesses. The year before I met Jim his step-father was released from prison and moved back to Khlong Toey slum, but became an alcoholic and died during fieldwork. After returning from fieldwork I learned that Jim went to the north of Thailand to seek out relatives who run a family business there. He returned to

Khlong Toey slum because the relationships deteriorated, and returned to work as a casual labourer at a local fruit and vegetable market.

The cases discussed here, whilst distinctive in their detail, were united by a great deal of turbulence due to the precariousness that marked the assistance available to the young people in question, and in this they were far from alone. Every young slum dweller in this research experienced the loss of a major form of support either during fieldwork or previous to it, and there was nothing in their situations to indicate that this would not happen again. This is not to say that nobody in the research sample or from slum communities in general ever succeeded in reaching the goals to which they aspired, such as gaining educational qualifications, getting jobs and finding housing, indeed (as noted earlier) it would take longitudinal research to determine whether or not young participants succeed in realising their dreams in the longer term. Rather, the point is that if successes were achieved it was in spite of the considerable instability that marked the support open to young slum dwellers, that their journeys were extremely arduous, and that successes tended to be short-lived. In some cases things went well for individuals for a while, even a relatively long while, but sooner or later the support mechanisms which enabled this seemed to falter: family members lost their jobs, became ill, died, were forced to flee their neighbourhoods, moved upcountry, went to prison or (re)turned to alcohol abuse. NGO scholarships were withdrawn, sometimes for reasons given and sometimes for reasons undisclosed. Friends had very limited resources with which to support each other and the wealth of community patrons was often the result of unsustainable debts which resulted in the threat of violence from money lenders and the end of their patronage. Patronage from wealthy partners always ceased when relationships broke down. For young slum dwellers, the journey towards a better future was an extremely difficult and turbulent one.

It is true that Thailand has systems which mean, in theory, that the attempt to build a better future is undertaken with public assistance for those who cannot depend on support from private or family networks. For example, universal education provision means that all children are given a 'free' school place until the age of fifteen.

However, the hidden yet necessary costs involved such as those incurred in purchasing study materials and school uniforms, and the loss of potential earnings from young people, effectively preclude those in low socio-economic positions from participating unless they can access financial assistance outside their families, or unless those families become severely indebted. Thailand also has a social security system, however this only provides minimal benefits to those working in the formal sector and is therefore not available to the majority of those in this research, who were engaged in informal work. With inadequate official support and precarious assistance from those around them, young slum dwellers were forced to forge their own futures, to be ultimately responsible for bringing about the material advancements they aspired to.

It may also be true that, as Mulder (1990) argues:

The Thai way to power and resources is to seek patronage, to attach oneself to a superior power... and to become the protégé ... of somebody who has more resources

(Mulder 1990, p.4)

However, for the vast majority of young people in this study such patronage, at least of a reliable and consistent nature, did not exist.

DOING IT OURSELVES

The way in which young slum dwellers struggled to get ahead with little (if any) reliable assistance was strongly reflected in their narratives, which spoke not only of a sense of being responsible for their own material futures, but of a sense in which this was as it *should* be. Young people spoke of the process of building a better material future as something over which they had choice and control, and in connection with this they spoke of the material futures they envisaged in terms of a

model of adulthood characterised by self-reliance and independence. Here, the felt sense of agency is once again overwhelming.

Many stated that if they studied hard enough they would be able to get good jobs, and that if they worked hard enough they would be able to earn enough money to have a good standard of living. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with Or, a young mother in her early twenties who ran a street food stall, in which she spoke of her dream to move to a 'beautiful' neighbourhood and open an international restaurant:

Yes, this is a big dream. Will it happen? If I work hard at the noodle stall then I think I can make it work. Let's say eighty per cent. For this I have to work every day and take no rest. But it's worth it, to make a better life for me and my son.

Similarly, when I asked seventeen year old Jim if he thought he would succeed in his dream of earning a lot of money, he spoke in terms of personal effort:

As I said I study at the community college now, I am studying for my lower secondary exams. I have two more years left. It is very, very difficult for me to study, I'm not a clever person, and sometimes I am lazy to study too, but I keep trying, keep trying. I believe if I study hard I will get the qualifications and I can start to improve my life.

A further example of the notion of succeeding through personal effort and decision making can be seen in the narrative of Note, a young man in his early twenties, who gave the following response to my question about whether he thought he would achieve his goal of running his own business: 'as long as I keep focused on the goal, even if I go off track I always come back to the goal, so I believe I can be successful,

yes'. Since returning from fieldwork, continued correspondence with Note revealed an entrenched belief that his achievements are, to a large extent, the product of his own hard work:

You think I have what I have today because of luck? No, luck has nothing to do with it. It's because I work hard. Luck is nothing. When I was on the streets I worked hard, even when I was a kid. Now I want to improve myself right, go up, up, up in the social, but it's not luck that lifts me, it's working hard.

Despite acknowledging, and feeling grateful for what assistance they did receive, the notion of succeeding – or not – through personal effort was prominent. Those who did not consider themselves to be on track to securing better material futures explained why this was the case with reference to their own behaviour, for example referring to being 'lazy' or spending their time in 'nonsense' ways (i.e. not working or studying enough). Many also located the reason for their lack of success in the personal choices and behaviour of those in their immediate families. For example, thirteen year old Bee explained the precariousness of her situation with reference mainly to her younger sister:

Now my family is having a very difficult time about money. My sister made a problem... She called her friend many times on the mobile, and it cost so much... a lot compared to mum's income. Well, I do what work I can but I don't get paid very much, not enough to fix the problem. And mum doesn't earn much money. Compared to the cost of the phone bill mum earns just a little. She borrowed some money from a money lender but that didn't pay the phone bill so we still have the debt. Now I am so worried because there is a notice from the court saying that if we don't pay we are in trouble. And we have to pay the money lender too. My stupid sister! I don't want to go back to the hardship we had before, I feel my life is just starting to get better.

Similarly, many adult carers attributed young people's apparent failure to improve their lives to personal choice and behaviour, bemoaning what they saw as a wilful destructiveness in light of increased opportunities. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with the father of a seventeen year old young woman:

My girl has the chance to make a better life. Her mother and I are poor, but she has the chance to improve her life and not know the hardship as we do. She has the opportunity for education, which we never had, but she chooses to spend all her time with her friends instead of studying. How can she improve her life in this way?

The sentiments in this narrative were common amongst adult carers; young people could achieve upward mobility if they tried hard and made the right decisions, and it was their responsibility to bring about their own material advancement. If they did not succeed in improving their lot it was down to personal choice. Linked to the way in which slum dwellers envisaged the journey towards a better material future as their responsibility, young people spoke of the destination – the future itself – in terms of self-reliance and independence. For example, the following excerpt is taken from Jim's interview and was his response to my question about whether he was facing any difficulties at the time:

The most difficult thing now is about the new beginning. I am not a kid any more, I am becoming an adult and I am trying to improve my life. Going back to school and working, I wonder can I do these things? Can I study again? Will I get a good job? I believe I can but it's very scary. In Thailand we become an adult when we can take care of ourselves, stop relying on others and look after ourselves. I am coming to be an adult so I should rely only on myself.

Many other young people echoed this emphasis on self-reliance in their narratives about the upward mobility they endeavoured to realise, and adult carers frequently cited self-reliance as one of the main hopes they had for the young people growing up in their charge. For example, the following excerpt is taken from an interview with Nan's grandmother, Ba Lek, her main carer at the time of fieldwork:

One thing is that I would like to see *nong* Nan be able to take care of herself. She only has me to look after her now but I am old and sick. Although she has her father and step-mother upcountry she will not live with them so she must learn to take care of herself, be independent and not rely on others to help her.

There is a strong resonance between the sense of self-reliance and individual responsibility that characterised slum dwellers' experiences and narratives, and the ideals promoted within certain elements of the context in which they were located. The following section turns to this context and its relevant constituent features. I do not claim an unequivocal, causal or one-way relationship between grand-level principles and people's practices or interpretations of them, however it is important to highlight the resonances identified here, as it is by virtue of acting and thinking in accordance with certain widely-promoted ideals that young slum dwellers' attempts to succeed were so readily thwarted.

CONTEXT

There are several aspects of the context in which young slum dwellers attempted to build better futures which resonate particularly strongly with their narrative of self-reliance and personal responsibility. Despite the characterisation of Thailand as an affiliative society 'in which people greatly depend upon each other and thus find their security in dependence and patronage rather than in "individualism"' (Mulder 1990, p.60), elements of the discursive frameworks in which participants were located celebrate the notions of self-reliance and personal responsibility. First, there

is the broad cultural script in which ‘scrounging’ is widely condemned. This condemnation was evident in the narratives of both poor and wealthy participants in this research. The following excerpt is taken from a conversation I had with a university professor and is illustrative of a general disdain for what was construed of as a tendency amongst poor people towards an over-reliance on others. In this particular conversation the university professor was explaining why she was opposed to the Thaksin government and what she dismissed as its ‘populist’ initiatives to make money available to poor communities:

Thaksin, we believe he just wants votes. This is why he gives money to poor people, to make them vote for him. Like the one million baht fund, yes the people like having the money, of course they do, but we believe this doesn’t really help them as they won’t learn to stand by themselves. In Thai we say *kee kaw*, like a scrounger. How can these people really improve themselves deep down if they always rely on other people to drop money onto them?

Second, and related to the above, slum dwellers’ narratives of self-reliance and personal responsibility resonate with one of the key principles of Theravada Buddhism. This holds as one of its central tenets the concept of *kamma*, which roughly translates as intentional action that brings about consequences: ‘Actions which are willed, deliberate, accompanied by volition, are kamma; these are potentially productive of a future result’ (Mills 1999, p.31). According to Theravada Buddhist philosophy it is through one’s intentional actions in the past that people’s current conditions have come about, and through their intentional actions in the present that people determine their conditions in this and future life cycles (and in spiritual terms whether or not they reach Nirvana or complete the journey towards Awakening). According to Mills the law of *kamma* contends that ‘unwholesome’ intentional actions bring about painful results and that ‘wholesome’ intentional actions bring about pleasant results (Mills 1999, p.32). In other words, the cultural-religious framework within which young slum dwellers are located places considerable emphasis on personal responsibility for one’s circumstances. With reference to the relationship between *kamma* and socio-economic positioning,

Mulder (1990) notes the following historical perception which continues to prevail in present day Thai society:

... a man's position in this world logically followed from the karma ... that he had built up in previous existences. If he happened to be poor and powerless in this existence, he somehow deserved it... To question the social order or one's place within it was to doubt the justice of Karma

(Mulder 1990, p.4)

The concept of *kamma* was clearly an important orienting principle for participants in their everyday lives, frequently invoked for example as the reason to behave in certain ways and not in others, and as the explanation for a good or bad turn of events. As indicated earlier, whilst it is important to note that the relationship between grand-level principles and every day practice and belief is highly complex and not something which this research was able to investigate in any depth, the emphasis that participants placed on personal responsibility for building better futures echoed this feature of the context in which they lived their lives and attempted to materialise their futures.

Third, slum dwellers' narratives of self-reliance resonate with common interpretations of Sufficiency Economy philosophy. The Sufficiency approach contends that 'individuals need a certain measure of self-reliance to deal best with the market' (UNDP 2007, p.xv) and participants in this research referred quite often to Sufficiency Economy thinking. For example, one afternoon I went on a neighbourhood walk with fifteen year old Bew and during our walk, as she was showing me where her extended family lived, we passed through a particularly deprived area. She explained that Loi, her informally-adopted younger brother had lived in the area previous to moving in with Bew's family, and this led to a conversation between Bew and me about the events leading up to his adoption (outlined in the previous chapter's vignette). When I asked Bew if her family

received any assistance in looking after Loi, she replied that they didn't and went on to say: 'well, we have Sufficiency Economy now'. When I asked what she meant she said 'we do things ourselves'.

Finally, the notions of self-reliance and personal responsibility resonate strongly with free market economics and the particular form of subjectivity which this promotes. The period spanning the 1940s to the 1960s in Thailand has been labelled 'the American era' (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005), a period in which the foundations of urban capitalism were laid down with substantial backing from the United States, and a period characterised by the promotion of a particular model of development (*ibid.*, p.140). At the end of the Second World War and the dawn of the Cold War, Thailand embarked on a rapid journey towards a free market economy, characterised by the promotion of economic growth in the private sector, foreign investment and the condemnation of state-led development policies (*ibid.*, p.151). This free market ideology has been further promoted in the Thai context through the structural adjustment loans given to the Thai government by the World Bank at the beginning of the 1980s.

At the heart of the free market agenda, pressed upon Thailand by the U.S. government and multilateral institutions, and pursued internally with vigour, lies a model of the human subject as a decision-making individual who is personally responsible for their own development or lack thereof. According to this model: 'action and responsibility for action reside with the person of the individual' (Preston 1996, p.253):

The free market comprises atomistic individuals who know their own autonomously arising needs and wants and who make contracts with other individuals through the mechanism of the marketplace to satisfy those needs and wants. (*ibid.*)

This notion, of the human subject as a decision-making agent responsible for his/her development, underpins the blame-the-victim approach to urban poverty that rose to particular prominence in the United States in the 1960s following Oscar Lewis' description of a culture of poverty within marginalised communities. The culture of poverty thesis (which, in its widely interpreted form sees the persistence of poverty as a result of the intergenerational transmission of certain negative attitudes and behaviours, as discussed in chapter two), continues to inform thinking and policy around inner city marginalisation to this day (Bourgois 2001). The notion of personal responsibility for one's own development is also one of the prominent features of the Thai and international *youth and development* discourse discussed in chapter two of this thesis.

In their personal endeavours to get ahead and in their valorisation of self-reliance and personal responsibility, the young slum dwellers in this research map neatly onto the prominent discourses noted here. And yet, ironically, it is precisely by virtue of being ideal subjects in terms of each of them that participants' journeys towards a better future are so very insecure. By operating in accordance with the rules of the game, i.e. by assuming ultimate responsibility for building a better future, urban poor youth emerge as the losers: with little in the way of reliable support, a future of higher education, decent work, liveable incomes and secure housing remains on the distant horizon.

In this study those who were on track to securing, or for the most part maintaining, a high material standard of living were those in receipt of substantial – and consistent – backing from people who wielded considerable financial and social power. Of all the young slum dwellers in this research there was one, twenty two year old Note, who really does seem to be on track to realising his dreams of material advancement.

Note was born in Khlong Toey but was sold at birth to a foster family outside, with whom he lived until he was thirteen, when his relationship with family members began to break down and eventually prompted him to leave home. Note ran away for

the first time when he was eleven, staying at friends' houses and on the streets, and continued to run away every time his domestic situation became unbearable for him, but each time his foster family tracked him down. When Note was thirteen he ran away for good and lived on the streets for two years, stealing food and money from shops, begging, racing motorbikes, working at a paper factory and working at a street food stall in a struggle to survive. During his time on the streets Note became addicted to gambling and when his gambling debts got out of control he returned to his foster family's house and stole their money. He was caught by the police and sent to a youth correction unit, where he stayed for six months, until a lawyer from a slum-based NGO whose remit includes working with juvenile offenders approached him and asked if he would like to apply to their orphanage and resume his studies. His application was successful and he moved from the youth correction unit into the orphanage. After a few months Note was sent to the north of Thailand, where the foundation runs an agricultural school for young people deemed to be at risk of returning to the streets if they remain in Bangkok. There he completed his compulsory education and returned to Bangkok to study computing for three years at vocational school. After this he won a scholarship to study for his International Baccalaureate in Norway, and having successfully completed this he was awarded a further scholarship to study for a Bachelor's degree in America. Through the NGO that supported him in his early studies Note was later introduced to an extremely wealthy American businessman who has provided him with considerable amounts of money and accommodation in America and Bangkok, and who has organised several stints of paid work experience in his US-based company. This man has also agreed to employ Note (on completion of his degree) in another of his US-based companies, in order that Note can gain the two years' work experience necessary to embark on a (fee-waivered) MBA course.

Note was not on course to realising his dreams of material advancement by virtue of being self-reliant or personally responsible (despite his vision to the contrary); he had the backing of a powerful slum-based NGO and more importantly, through this, of an extremely rich sponsor whose patronage has proved, for the most part, to be reliable. In this he was highly unusual, and a source of considerable jealousy amongst his peers in the slum. Before I met Note I had heard about him through Ganya and her

friends, who told me of his pending return from studying in Europe and of their jealousy of the sponsorship he received and the opportunity this gave him to make something of his life. Once he arrived in Khlong Toey and began hanging around in some of the same places as Ganya and I, our encounters were invariably strained, Note telling of his experiences abroad and Ganya responding by emphasising her age-based seniority (she was a few months older than him) or some other aspect of her life that she thought might elevate her status to match his.

The wealthy young people in this research relied heavily on their families and networks of affiliates and acquaintances to provide the support that young slum dwellers were so badly in need of but did not have. And these families and extended networks were, by definition, extremely well positioned to assist in a multitude of ways, providing the inputs necessary for the accrual and preservation of material wealth. It was by virtue of enjoying such a head start in the game that these wealthy young people were rewarded by it.

In addition to the elusiveness of the dream of material advancement, through their attempts to build better material futures in the only ways available to them, young slum dwellers inadvertently undermined their attempts to look wealthy and modern, and further weakened their claims to the status of good children. The very need for assistance from outsiders in the first place speaks of a considerable level of poverty, and indeed having to turn to NGO-affiliated patrons was widely seen as one of the markers of poverty and low status. Further, in turning to family members for assistance (although again this assistance may not have been adequate), young people were seen as taking from, rather than giving to the family. As P Yom, a mother of a thirteen year old girl, commented:

When I was young I had to work to pay for my study. I left school when I was ten to help get money for my mum, but I went back to school when I was fourteen, to night school, and paid for it myself. I worked in the day and

studied at night. And I didn't ask my mum for anything. Nowadays, no. Just taking and no giving.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have made several interrelated points. First, that the notion of working towards a better material future was a strong orienting principle for young slum dwellers, whatever objective material conditions they were living in. Second, that, despite being firmly embedded within personal and social networks and seeking help from various people to build better material futures, young slum dwellers were forced to take ultimate responsibility as individuals for their attempts at material advancement due to the precariousness of the support available to them. Third, that the notion of individual responsibility was reflected in slum dwellers' narratives, both in terms of how things *were* and how things *should* be, and fourth that the notion of being individual agents responsible for their own success or failure resonates strongly with the ideals promoted in certain prominent elements of the local, national and global context in which slum dwellers lives were nested. Discussion in this chapter has also shown how, in their endeavours to build better material futures, young slum dwellers undermine their attempts to construct themselves as wealthy, modern subjects and good children.

On one level, this chapter offers a rejoinder to the culture of poverty thesis, outlined in the literature chapter, that poor people are poor because of the intergenerational transmission of behavioural and attitudinal traits that position them against 'development'; it shows how participants were prevented from getting ahead despite their best efforts to do so. In response to this, Lewis himself would probably have argued that his culture of poverty thesis simply doesn't apply to the particular people in this study – it was after all only intended to refer to a minority of poor people who exhibited the seventy-odd traits that he outlines (in which case his theory is true by definition and does not add anything meaningful to debates on poverty). Nonetheless, in its widely accepted form, the culture of poverty thesis is taken to apply to the urban poor and their supposedly pathological tendencies *in general*, and discussion

in this thesis has shown that this picture is far from accurate and no doubt rather offensive to those who struggle daily to get by and get ahead with little support and a great deal of negative exposure.

Discussion in this chapter has drawn particular attention to the irony that it is precisely by virtue of acting and thinking in accordance with the widely-promoted ideal of personal responsibility that young slum dwellers' efforts to succeed are largely undermined. Those who could bend the rules (i.e. who could depend on others) had a relatively smooth journey towards (maintaining) material success. For those who could not bend the rules (i.e. for whom development really was a question of doing it themselves) the journey was arduous and unstable, and the destination seemingly elusive. This chapter offers an antidote to the view, suggested in the emerging youth and development discourse, that as long as young people take responsibility for their own development through making the 'right' decisions and taking the 'right' courses of action their futures will be bright. In this chapter I have demonstrated how, for those who think and act in line with the dominant discourse of self-reliance, the future looks uncertain at best.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

This thesis has explored the lives of young people living in slum communities in Bangkok. It has examined their search for a better life, investigating what this means for participants, how they go about trying to secure various elements of it and the consequences of their endeavours. Following this brief introduction, this chapter begins with an overview of the empirical chapters and the key arguments made therein. It highlights the emphasis that I have placed throughout on the *unintended consequences* of practice and points to three conclusions that can be drawn from this. The second section of the chapter suggests some practical recommendations, and the final section returns to the participants whose lives and stories form the core of this thesis, offering updates on those with whom I have been able to maintain communication.

EMPIRICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

The three empirical chapters in this thesis each explore a different sphere of practice; attempts to *live the teenage life*, attempts to *contribute to the family*, and attempts to bring about *material advancement*. In the first empirical chapter we saw how young slum dwellers were actively oriented towards a lifestyle characterised by conspicuous consumption of the commodities of the global youth culture industry and related practices of embodiment, representation and interaction. In this, we saw how young people were actively attempting to distance themselves from associations with poverty, parochialism and old fashioned, rural ways, and how each element of the teenage life discussed was strongly endorsed by market forces. In that chapter I highlighted the way in which, as young people attempted to present themselves as

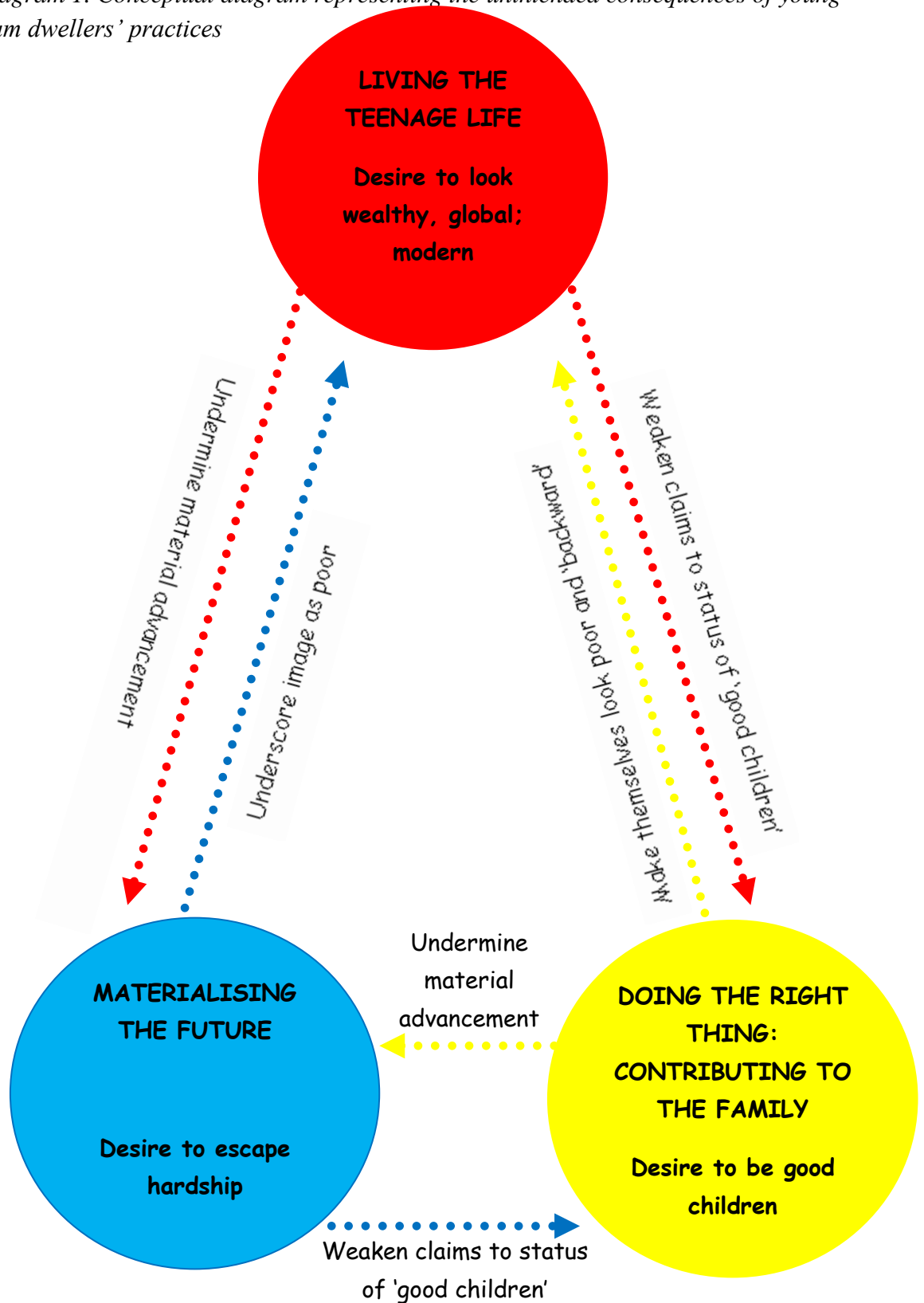
modern youth, they inadvertently weakened their attempts to achieve ‘good child’ status, through diverting potential time and money away from the family, and in light of related narratives concerning ‘bad teenagers’. In attempting to live the teenage life, young people also undermined their chances of material advancement, through diverting potential time and money away from education and the potential opportunities this brings to access decent jobs and thereby improve material standards of living. In addition I highlighted the way in which the dream of being and being seen as wealthy, global and modern itself remained out of reach for participants, in light of the absence of adequate resources, in light of the constant arrival of newer branded commodities into Bangkok’s landscape of intense commercialisation and in light of the difficulty young people experienced maintaining their images outside the slum environment. Discussion in this chapter also pointed to the way in which young slum dwellers held themselves responsible when their attempts to create their desired images did not succeed.

In the second empirical chapter we saw how young slum dwellers were also actively oriented towards *contributing to their families*, through direct and indirect financial support and through the performance of domestic and care work. In this, we saw how they were actively attempting to construct themselves as good children, and how this was necessary if they were to make viable subjects of themselves according to the local cultural script of filial obligation. In that chapter I highlighted the way in which, as young people attempted to demonstrate their moral worth they inadvertently weakened their attempts to look wealthy and modern (in light of the widespread association of assisting the family with poverty and old-fashioned ways) and further undermined their attempts at material advancement (again through diverting potential time and money away from education). Further to this, I highlighted the way in which dreams of augmenting moral status were themselves somewhat elusive to participants, due to the absence of resources with which to support their families to the degree required and the related narrative of the ‘uncaring/ unhelpful teenager’. Discussion here also illustrated the way in which young slum dwellers blamed themselves when they failed to fulfil their filial obligations in the eyes of their adult carers.

In the third empirical chapter we saw how young slum dwellers were, in addition, actively oriented towards future material advancement, and how they worked towards this through studying and working and by turning to others for assistance with these. In this we saw how they struggled determinedly to escape the material hardship that characterised their life experiences, and how the notion of material development was both promoted and problematised in their surrounding context. In that chapter I highlighted the way in which dreams of material advancement also seemed elusive, in light of the fragility of the support available to participants. Further, I pointed to the way in which, in their endeavours to build better material futures, young slum dwellers weakened their own chances of success in building images of wealth and modernity (the very need for assistance in the first place, coupled with the fragility of that assistance, underscored their poverty), and undermined their attempts to construct themselves as good children (they required support *from* their families instead of giving *to* them). This chapter emphasised the way in which young slum dwellers held themselves to account for their apparent inability to pave the way for future material advancement.

Throughout these empirical chapters I have placed an emphasis on the unintended consequences of young slum dwellers' practices, in particular on the ways in which attempts to build a better life in each sphere of practice remain somewhat elusive and result in significant compromises to their endeavours in the other two spheres. These processes are represented in the diagram on the following page, but an equally apt way of understanding them is to imagine the search for a better life as the wallpapering of a room: as a young person pastes a roll of paper to the wall a bubble of air appears. They smooth the bubble down only to find that this creates another couple of bubbles nearby, and as they begin to smooth each of these down the other two pop back up. And so they go on, caught in a cycle of unintended consequences, trying but not quite managing, to smooth one pocket of air before another one appears, without the tools necessary for the job.

Diagram 1. Conceptual diagram representing the unintended consequences of young slum dwellers' practices



The issue of unintended consequences points to three main conclusions. First, it highlights the importance of addressing *multiple spheres of life* (for example, moral, cultural, socio-economic) as well as different elements within each sphere (for example, consumption as well as production within economic activity) in the study of marginalised youth and the development of policy towards them. If research and policy are restricted to one sphere of practice or element therein, they are likely to overlook the interconnections between spheres, and it is within these interconnections that counter-productive tendencies can occur. At present youth and development discourse such as that encapsulated in the World Bank's 2007 report *Development and the Next Generation* is significantly out of touch with the multi-faceted nature of the lives, dreams and efforts of marginalised youth. This appears to be less a matter of having ignored the voices of youth and more a matter of having focused so selectively on one aspect – that of productive economic activity – that other salient elements of their lives are sidelined. If different spheres of life were recognised then the adverse interconnections between them – the complex ways in which practices in one area adversely affect endeavours in others – could be acknowledged, and policy and programming could be built on a more holistic understanding of the complexities that young people face in their search for a better life.

Second, considering the unintended consequences of young slum dwellers' practices helps to remind us of the existence of *structures* such as socio-economic inequality, the global youth culture industry, norms and expectations surrounding gender and generational relations and social networks to name but a few, and the ways in which these constrain and are constitutive of (marginalised) agency. In some ways the unintended consequences of the practices emphasised in this study are a product of these structures; participants look 'bad' by virtue of trying to live the teenage life partly because of their low positioning within an unequal socio-economic structure and the strain this places on their scarce resources. Participants look 'poor' and 'backwards' by virtue of trying to construct themselves as good children again in part because of their low positioning within the socio-economic structure and the restricted options this leaves them for repaying the debt of gratitude into which they are born. Participants' efforts in working towards material advancement are

continually thwarted due to their low positioning within an unequal socio-economic structure and the resulting fragility of support available to them. As it stands, the *youth and development* discourses discussed in chapter two of this thesis are insufficiently attuned to the structures that constrain and constitute agency; they seem to assume that young people's efforts to bring about development, along with state and private sector support for those efforts, will be sufficient to achieve the outcomes intended. And yet, as we have seen, those efforts are made within – and made extremely difficult by – the constraints of socio-economic inequality as well as other structures. If research and policy into the lives of marginalised youth in the developing world are to understand and benefit those young people, then they must be more attuned to the multiple structures that surround agency and the unintended consequences these give rise to. The *new anthropology of youth* literature (discussed in chapter two) also has a tendency to focus on young people's (cultural) agency, celebrating its existence and demonstrating the ways in which it is exercised in light of earlier emphases on youth as passive objects of enculturation. This focus on the existence and exercise of agency, whilst laudable, arguably runs the risk of obscuring from view the structures that determine young people's experiences in the world, and the unintended outcomes these can produce.

Third, the empirical chapters in this thesis serve as a reminder that unintended consequences can ensue from the process of participating in dominant cultures as well as resisting them. As they stand, the handful of existing studies that emphasise the contradictory, ironic or counter-productive outcomes of youth cultural practice tend to focus on the unintended consequences of practices of *resistance*. The empirical chapters in this thesis show how, even when young people from marginalised communities attempt to participate in dominant cultures, their actions still entail some profoundly counter-productive outcomes. Even when they embrace dominant notions of wealth, sexuality, global connection and modernity, even when they enact the dominant cultural norm of filial obligation and even when they strive for the dominant goal of material development and assume personal responsibility for it, still they undermine their own endeavours.

My increasing awareness of the unintended consequences of participants' practices points to a methodological conclusion to which I would like to draw attention here. It has been by virtue of withdrawing from participants' lives (both physically and emotionally) and engaging with critical theories about them (as opposed to their own understandings), that I have been able to acknowledge and analyse the unintended outcomes of their endeavours and the structures that inform these. Whilst in 'the field' and aligned with participants' own interpretations (and at that point with the new social studies of childhood and its emphasis on agency), my analysis was much more strongly oriented towards the positive outcomes of agency; towards seeing success through its exercise. Once I returned from fieldwork and as time passed, I became increasingly distant from participants (albeit still in contact with some) and increasingly aligned with other literatures, and their 'successes' began to appear more as instances in longer life courses whose trajectories would rise and fall over time. My analysis shifted to place more of an emphasis on some of the structures that constrain as well as enable agency. This points not only to the importance of ensuring a degree of detachment from participants following fieldwork (should over-attachment have been an issue), but to the potential for multiple and shifting interpretations of data and the related task of social research in bringing these, and the contexts in which they are produced, to light.

Despite the unintended outcomes that ensue from the search for a better life, the participants in this research are remarkable in their determination and persistence, and especially in their persistent and determined *hope* in the face of continual setbacks. They appear at times to be buffeted around like leaves in the wind, and yet each time their goals elude them they pick themselves up, dust themselves down and start over, somehow managing to retain a sense of hope that one day things will get better, and perhaps even stay that way. Here, hope – an example of what Durham (2008) refers to as 'the increasingly interesting field of sentiment' in the new anthropology of youth (Durham 2008, p.946) – appears less a matter of audacity³⁸ and more a matter of cruel necessity, a much needed companion to those whose

³⁸ Obama (2007) *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*.

attempts to build a better life are defined by struggle and continual setbacks. As twenty one year old Or stated during one of our last encounters:

Well yes I hope that I can make things work for me, my boyfriend and especially for my son, I want him to have a comfortable life. Keep hoping! If we don't have hope we have nothing, right?

RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis is not intended as a development policy or programming study. However, there are some practical recommendations arising from it. Aside from the evident need for a real redistribution of wealth, there is perhaps a role for critical pedagogy or consciousness-raising both within the Thai education system and development organisations working with marginalised young people, which could facilitate a critical awareness of for example, the workings of consumer capitalism and its implications for them. Further, there is perhaps a role for the implementation of a grant system that not only covers the cost of education and its hidden extras, as do the current sponsorship schemes, but pays young people whilst they are studying (for example the equivalent of the minimum wage) so that they can continue to contribute to their families whilst at school preparing for their futures. To be sustainable this would need to be subsidised, so as not to fall prey to the same fragility as current sponsorship schemes that rely on the patronage of individual donors.

PARTICIPANT UPDATES³⁹

Inevitably, as researchers conduct ethnographic studies such as this, we forge stronger and more lasting bonds with some participants than with others. Through the use of email and online social networking sites I remain in contact with some of the

³⁹ I have been informed by Am (my interpreter for the wealthy component of the research) that the wealthy young people in the study all remain in education and living with their parents. Those who were in their last year of upper secondary school at the time of interviewing are now studying at university.

young people with whom I enjoyed a special rapport, and through them with others. What follows below are brief updates, accurate at the time of writing⁴⁰, on those with whom I continue to enjoy direct or indirect contact.

Note (now in his mid twenties) has almost finished his Bachelor's degree in the U.S. and continues to receive support from his very wealthy patron (despite several close shaves due to gambling and alcohol problems, an unplanned entry into fatherhood and extremely tense relations with the slum-based NGO). He plans to begin a two-year work placement (organised by his sponsor) in the U.S. in autumn 2010 and then study for an MBA (paid for by his sponsor). About a year ago Note was put in contact, for the first time, with his father who lives with his extended family in the north east of Thailand and works in the construction industry. Note visited him but reported that this made him extremely uncomfortable, and he left feeling angry and hurt that his father had left his mother when she was pregnant with Note and had made no attempt to find Note himself, but had merely responded when the NGO tracked him down.

Ganya (also in her mid twenties) has had numerous jobs since I returned from fieldwork, including working as an assistant in a production house and teaching English in a variety of locations in Thailand, but did not find anything that she enjoyed or that paid her much money. She is now back in Bangkok working as an assistant in a language centre and looking for work that she might enjoy. She has moved to larger rental accommodation with her father (and is happy not be sharing a room with him!), but continues to live in the slum as she cannot afford the rent outside. She would like to buy a house but cannot afford to do so outside the slum and is hesitant to do so in the slum whilst the official status and future of the communities remains unclear. Ganya would like to do a Masters degree but does not have the money or time to do so at present. Shortly after fieldwork she entered into a long distance relationship with an Australian man whom she met on his travels in Thailand, but that did not last and she is single for now. In the summer of 2009 Ganya was contacted by her mother (whom she had not seen since she was three),

⁴⁰ April 2010.

who lives with her European husband, in Europe. Ganya and her mother met when her mother visited Thailand, and they are getting to know each slowly over the telephone and by email.

Sim (in her mid-twenties as well) continues to work as a waitress, although she has worked in various restaurants since fieldwork finished. She spent a few months in the UK in 2008, staying with her fiancé, but she returned to Thailand when that relationship ended. In 2009 she met a new boyfriend and lived with him in his apartment in Sathorn, an area of Bangkok popular with ex-pats, but that relationship also ended, when he returned to America on completion of his work assignment. *Sim* is single for now and has moved back to Khlong Toey slum to live with her grandmother. She hopes to find a boyfriend with whom she can settle down, move out of the slum and begin a family of her own.

Or (also in her mid-twenties) continued to run a food stall and mini convenience store outside the building where she rented a room with her boyfriend and son. She did this for a few months after fieldwork, but then broke up with her boyfriend and in 2008 she and her son left the community. She owed a considerable amount of money to the landlord of the building for the lease of the space to run her food stall, and to the people from whom she had borrowed money in order to buy the equipment for cooking. Since *Or* left, Ganya (through whom I kept abreast of *Or*'s life) has been unable to find her and so does not know any further details of her situation.

Mote (now in his mid-twenties) spent a couple of years living outside Khlong Toey slum after fieldwork, but has since moved back and now lives with his mother in the house where he grew up. He is not in a relationship at the moment. He continues to enjoy computer animation and still hopes to get a job working in this area, but for now he works as an assistant in an office.

Yoot (mid-twenties) recently moved out of the house where he was living with his older sister, and now rents a room on his own in another slum community. He splits his time between his place and his girlfriend's rented room nearby. They have been together for two years. Yoot no longer works for his uncle preparing fruit for street vendors to sell, instead he works as a labourer at the port for a shipping container company.

Ning (now in her early twenties) returned to live with her aunt and uncle in one of Khlong Toey's peripheral slum communities after she became pregnant and dropped out of school. She continues to live there and spends her time looking after her son and helping her aunt run her food stall. She was never in a relationship with her son's father, and remains single for the time being.

Nan (now in her late teens) continued to divide her time between her grandmother's room and several friends' houses for a while after fieldwork, doing odd jobs to earn money. However, in 2009 she left Bangkok after a row with her grandmother and Ganya (through whom I kept abreast of Nan's life) has not seen her since. The last time Ganya saw Nan's grandmother, she did not know Nan's whereabouts and was very worried about her.

Bew (now in her late teens) continued to study after fieldwork and completed her lower secondary education. She is now enrolled on a part time beauty course at vocational school, works part time on her parents' food stall and continues to live with her parents in the slum. Bew's younger adopted brother Loi, whom Bew helped look after during fieldwork, now lives in an orphanage as Bew's family can no longer afford to support him.

Bee (now approaching her late teens) continued to study after fieldwork, living with an aunt and her family, working increased hours as a cleaner to make up for losing part of her educational sponsorship, and looking after her adopted younger brother.

In 2009 her mother moved out of the community where she was living and took Bee with her and out of school, for reasons that were not made clear. Ganya (through whom I kept abreast of Bee's life) has been unable to contact them.

Dtae (also approaching his late teens) continued to study for a while after fieldwork, but he dropped out of school when his parents broke up, and worked with his mother on her market stall. Dtae, his mother and sister since moved to a different community and Ganya (who has kept me informed about them) does not see him anymore, although sadly he has been seen in the community sniffing glue with a group of friends.

Arun (now in his early twenties) continues to live with his parents, although they have moved to a different slum community. He dropped out of the course he was enrolled on when his family were experiencing acute financial difficulties and did not return. He continues to work on his mother's market stall. He hopes to return to college and study music in the future. He was in a relationship for a while but this ended and he is single for now.

Em (now in his early twenties) became a father shortly after I returned from fieldwork. He moved to a different community to live with his girlfriend and her family and continues to live there and work at the port as a casual labourer. He dropped out of the course he was enrolled on in order to work more and earn more money to support his young family. His girlfriend is expecting another baby.

Jim (now in his early twenties) returned to Bangkok after fieldwork, having spent a while in the north of Thailand living and working with relatives who ran a business there. He lived in Khlong Toey for a while, doing various casual jobs, and moved again to the north of Thailand in 2009. Ganya (who kept me informed of Jim's circumstances) is no longer in contact with him.

Som (now in his early twenties) lived with a friend's family up until I returned home from fieldwork, since his mother and sister moved upcountry in the wake of a family dispute over the settlement of his grandmother's will and the inheritance her property. However, this arrangement became untenable because of financial difficulties experienced by his friend's family and their need to move. He stayed with various other friends over the next few months, until he began a relationship with a young woman and lived with her and her family in a neighbouring slum community. This relationship ended in 2008 and *Som* rented a room on his own for a while, before moving in with a new girlfriend in the same community, where he still lives. He sees his mother occasionally when she returns to Bangkok on family business. *Som* continues to do casual labouring work at the port, sometimes supplementing his income by testing beauty products for market research companies before their release to the general public. He dropped out of the course he was enrolled on and no longer studies. *Som* continues to dream of working in an office from nine to five, wearing a suit and having a nice house in a nice area to come home to at the end of the day, and he continues to hope that one day this dream might become reality.

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